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Adventure

A NEW
WESTERN WRITER...
LUKE SHORT

**KILLER'S
GOLD**

by

ARTHUR O. FRIEL

**JAMES B. HENDRYX
THEODORE ROSCOE**

THOMAS
ROGERS
'35

AUGUST 1ST

ADVENTURE



15 Cents



Wherever Brave Men Meet

Mozambique, Madagascar, Zamboanga, Saigon. "It's a tough trade in the China Seas." Callao, Calabar, Port Said, Port of Spain. "The west coast is the white man's grave." Powder River, Cripple Creek, the Greasy Grass, the Alamo. "There's no law west of the Pecos." Disko Bay, Biscoe Bay, Tierra del Fuego, Fort Yukon. "Hereabouts there died a very gallant gentleman." Brandywine, the Bloody Angle, San Juan Hill, Chateau Thierry. "Come on, you sons, do you want to live forever?" Do you thrill to the names of faraway places, of battles old and new? Stories by men who have been, who have seen, who know, are in



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Twice a Month

- The Feud at Single Shot (first of five parts) LUKE SHORT 2**
 "You can't stay in Single Shot," growled the sheriff to Dave Turner, who had come back after eight years of exile. "You curled your tail here once too often." The young rancher answered with a drawl thick and slow. "You can't make it stick, fat man. I don't reckon I'll have much business here, but when I do I'm coming in."
- Killers' Gold (a novelette) .ARTHUR O. FRIEL 26**
 Deadly, jungle-girded, the Orinoco guards her treasures. Pierce had seen his comrades die, fighting her. There was starvation in his belly, an empty gun in his holster, slavery waiting on the shore. But ahead in a crumbling river city, lay yellow stuff—a passport out of the fever-swamps, if he could get there in time. Alone, he paddled on.
- Rise and Fight Again! . . .THEODORE ROSCOE 66**
 When they ate the last of the biscuit and hunted the bottom-boards for crumbs, when the engine ran out of gas and they rigged the oar for a sail, when ten sun-baked, thirsting, yowling men faced the smallest stowaway ever to be marooned on a becalmed sea—then it came—the glorious mutiny of Mushy.
- A Case for Coroner Jase . . .JAMES B. HENDRYX 77**
 The law they made in Little Tamarack said, "Any law which is notoriously illegal to be broke, like murder, claim-jumpin', stealin' an' cache-robbin', is hereby deemed to be hangable offenses upon conviction by a miners' meetin' . . ."
- Port Royal Pride ARTHUR D. HOWDEN SMITH 96**
 "Give me a troop of horse and I'll harry the French to their ships and save Mistress Felicity," said Long Diccon the Picaroon. "And then, if ye are determined, sirs, I'll fight ye both—but together."
- Destination Unknown . . .CLIFFE MANVILLE 107**
 Six hundred miles out over the Pacific we lost the radio beam and Ukell wouldn't turn back, just as he wouldn't let us bring tools to cut away the motors and stay afloat awhile after we crashed at seventy-five miles an hour on the lonely, dangerous water.
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Howard V. L. Bloomfield, Editor

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THE FEUD AT SINGLE SHOT

CHAPTER I

GOLD FOR SINGLE SHOT

ON THE second seat from the front of the coach, facing forward, two cowpunchers were hunkered down, apparently asleep, for it was night. Their backs were to the poker game being played across the aisle by three cowpunchers and a professional gambler on two up-ended suitcases kept upright against the lurching of the train by four pairs of knees.

The gambler, a young man, glanced up the dimly lighted aisle and muttered quietly:

"Here comes Hoagy and he's on the prod."

The players did not betray they had

heard him until the middle-aged brakeman, Hoagy Henshaw by name, paused beside the game and placed a proprietary hand on the back of the seat. His not unamiable face was fretted under the stiff cap of authority he wore.

The cowpuncher whose back was to Hoagy slapped his hand down.

"Three Johns, gents, and a pair of bullets. Bury the dead." Then, as if he had interrupted himself in the midst of a story, he continued: "—And this jasper with the feet the size of a loadin' chute turns to the brakie, real polite-like, and says: 'So there's a law agin' playin' poker on a train, is they?'"

"What did the brakie say to that?" a second cowpuncher, seated next to the speaker, inquired innocently.

"The brakie, he said: 'It's a law, my



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First of Five Parts

By LUKE SHORT

friend. Not that I care if you play poker on a train. You can play it anywheres. I'd like to play it with you.' And this Big Foot whips out a plow handle and sticks it in the brakie's belly and says: 'Now, ain't that fine! I reckon we can make a place for you. Jest set down.' The brakie sets down and they dealt him a hand after he'd bought in the game to the tune of a couple of two-figger bills."

"Then what happened?" his mate asked.

"Well, when the brakie'd been cleaned, Big Foot says: 'Mebbe you'd like a loan?' real meanin'-like. The brakie says he wouldn't and Big Foot sticks the gun in the brakie's belly agin' and says: 'Mebbe you didn't hear me. I ast you if you wanted a loan?' The brakie says sure, he wants a loan. They plays for

another hour, the brakie still losin' and still tryin' to get away. When they comes to Big Foot's stop, he looks around. 'How much am I into you?' he asts the brakie. 'Fifty dollars, ain't it?' The brakie says yes and Big Foot looks around the car. 'Danged if old Henry Crossman couldn't use these here plush cushions on that ore-wagon of his,' Big Foot says. Well, he thunk another two minutes and come to find out almost everybody he knew was freightin' ore. He just helped hisself to half the seats in that car."

"What did the brakie do?" the second cowpuncher asked.

"I reckon he let him. Big Foot was a mean man."

The second cowpuncher nodded sagely, then looked at the floor.



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"I reckon he let him. Big Foot was a mean man."

The second cowpuncher nodded sagely, then looked at the floor.

"What size boots you wear, Finney?" he asked casually.

"Elevens," the story-teller replied, just as casually.

The second cowpuncher looked up and saw Hoagy, whose arm was slowly withdrawing from the back of the seat. "Hello, Hoagy. Like to sit in?"

"Me?" Hoagy said, with well-feigned astonishment. "Hell, no. I was never so busy in my life. You fellers go ahead and have your fun."

He retreated, shaking his head soberly.

The gambler, seated next the aisle, laughed silently at Hoagy's back. He built a cigarette with quick and sure fingers, shaking his head.

"What size boots *do* you wear, Finney?" he asked.

The broad-faced, good-natured puncher across the seat chuckled. "That's what's funny. I wear size elevens."

Again the gambler laughed. His wide-set blue eyes roamed across the aisle to include the two cowpunchers in the joke, but they were still asleep. His eyes traveled to the one figure seated against the end of the car. He saw only a surly-faced cowpuncher looking out the window into the night. From a loose mouth a soiled cigarette drooped, curling smoke up into unblinking eyes. Cupped hands held a match preparatory to lighting the cigarette.

The gambler's eyes narrowed a little as he watched the man light his already burning cigarette. Observed now, the gambler was still-faced, quiet. He was perhaps in his early thirties. A black flowing tie accentuated the whiteness of his linen, which showed above a checkered vest. The lapels of his black coat were edged in braid and his trousers were striped.

A close observer might have noticed with surprise that the wrinkles around his eyes were of the kind that spider-webbed from the outer corners, sun-wrinkles, instead of the kind that

pouched the lower lids, the wrinkles bred over a faro table in the uncertain flicker of an overhead saloon lamp.

When the gambler saw the cowpuncher light still another match, he turned to his seat mate, his mouth open to speak. Suddenly, he closed it, shrugged a little and his face was still again, incurious.

The sight of the man next to him had changed his mind, evidently, for the man had a sullen, almost chinless, face, so clean-shaven it looked raw. He was a cowpuncher, in his middle thirties, whose continual scowling had worn creases in his forehead and soft loose face. He had been waked up from a doze two hours back to make up a fourth at poker.

"Let's play stud," he growled, picking up the deck. "This ain't poker, it's drop-the-handkerchief."

Finney eyed him speculatively and spat precisely into the aisle. He yawned, stood up.

"I'm startin' a game of draw back here if anybody wants to buy in," he announced.

The chinless cowpuncher flushed, but did not make a move. Finney cashed in a few chips, nodded to the gambler and left, followed by his companion.

The gambler nodded also, then lounged back in his seat. He heard the door behind him open, and idly guessed that the match-lighting smoker had gone out. The door had not swung shut five seconds before one of the sleeping cowpunchers, a six-foot red-head, the gambler noticed, stood up, wide awake, stepped over his partner and went out also with a kind of tense haste.

The gambler's companion moved to the seat facing the gambler and picked up the cards.

"How about a showdown?" he asked. His face was still flushed from the words Finney had dropped so casually.

The gambler shook his head. "Finney's

startin' a game down in back if you still feel like it."

"You're a gambler, ain't you?" the man asked truculently.

"When I'm at a table, yes. When I'm not, I do what I please."

The gambler looked indolently across the aisle. When his eyes turned, they were staring into the steady muzzle of a Colt in the hands of the chinless puncher.

"I say we'll play cards," the cowpuncher said in a low voice.

"I reckon not." The gambler's speech was a quiet drawl.

He saw the eyes of the puncher smear over and watched the thumb start to slide off the hammer. The trigger was pressed flat against the back of the guard.

"Gamblers don't come high in this country, stranger," the puncher replied thickly.

The gambler shrugged, but made no movement. He knew the train was going slow enough that the cowpuncher could release the hammer point-blank in his face, make a dive for the door before any one realized what had happened and be swallowed up in the night. He could feel the hackles rise on his neck.

"Once more," the cowpuncher said softly. "Let's you and me play cards."

The gambler shook his head slowly.

From across the aisle a gun lanced fire in a deafening explosion. It was followed by a sharp cry from the cowpuncher who drew a bloody, gunless hand to his chest. The gambler was out of his seat like a cat and drove his fist into the face of the cowpuncher.

Turning, he saw a sleepy-eyed cowboy sitting erect, a six-gun drooping across his knee, a slow grin creasing a long, lean face under raven-black hair.



WHEN the red-head stepped out the train door on to the front platform, the man squatting over the coupling from the platform of the baggage car ahead looked

up. He was the man who had left the passenger coach a half minute before.

"Howdy," the red-head drawled. The train was going so slow that his voice carried distinctly.

"Whadda' you want?" the man growled, still squatting, his guns hanging down from his hips like fins.

"Air," was the brief reply. The red-head lounged his even six feet of height against the end of the car, his gray eyes narrowed a little and suddenly wary.

"Passengers ain't supposed to ride the platform," the man said.

"Reckon that hits us both, don't it?"

"I'm one of the train crew," the man replied evenly.

"So am I," the red-head replied.

Slowly, the man came erect, his figure squat and shadowy in the light of the turned-down lamp that hung between the cars.

"Want me to call the brakie?" the man asked slowly.

"Sure. Call him. Mebbe he could tell me a lot of things I'm wonderin'."

A pause.

"For instance?"

"I been watchin' you in there for the last ten minutes," the red-head said. "You was smokin'. You lit that cigarette eight times when it was still goin'. Who's out there?"

He jerked his head out toward the night. A shot rang out from inside the coach. Neither man took his eyes off the other.

The train gave a sudden buck as the brakes screamed on. The red-head felt himself lifted from the wall. His hands streaked to his guns, swiveled up and exploded as he felt himself lunging across the space between the two cars. The man on the baggage-car platform slid abruptly to a sitting position, coughing pulpily, his hands locked on the butts of his guns, as the red-head crashed into the end of the baggage car. He took an accurate snap shot at the lantern, then opened the door to the baggage car.

"Blow them lights! It's a stickup," he yelled.

He did not even wait for the startled baggageman to obey him, but swung himself to the top of the car.

The train had come to a stop now, almost at the top of the grade. The red-head could see horsemen ahead in the glare of the engine light. Realizing he was sky-lined, he crouched low on the roof, raced forward, leaped to the tender, then crouched down, waiting to see if he had been discovered.

"Let 'em know we're here," a voice growled from the ground beside the baggage car.

"You damn fool. Wait till we're inside. They'll slam that door shut on us and we can't blow 'em out. Wait'll Snipe and Chinch cut that passenger coach off."

Stealthily, the red-head made his way over the coal until he could see down into the engine cab. Two masked men stood facing the fireman and engineer, who had been backed into one window seat cringing away from menacing guns. The red-head's action was quick.

He slid down the heaped coal, both guns roaring at the two bandits silhouetted against the fire-door. One man pitched his length on the floor plates and the other made a wild, crippled dash for the steps. The red-head heard him sprawl on the ground, loosing a string of bitter oaths. Suddenly, the night around them came alive with shots, winking orange in the darkness.

"Get goin'!" the red-head commanded briefly to the engineer. "Will she run?"

"I dunno. We ain't made the top of the grade yet."

"Blow the damn thing up foggin' her over!" Then: "Look out!"

The three of them crouched in the shelter of the cab as a sweeping fire from horsemen racked the engine.

"Your track all right?" the red-head asked the fireman.

"Yeah. No blockade. Them two swung

up just as we started nosin' over the grade. They made us slam on—"

"Then get this damn thing fannin'," the red-head interrupted him.

The engineer leaned against a lever which brought forth a rumbling shudder. The red-head dragged the limp form of the bandit from in front of the fire-door and dumped him off the train.

There was a running fire as the train labored into motion, most of it directed toward the engine. Glass tinkled down to the floor and the engineer swore wrathfully. The red-head sent a couple of shots into the night, then looked ahead as he did so for the top of the grade, which was close now.

As they nosed over it, he turned and faced the engine crew. The train was gathering speed steadily as it swung over the top. All of them listened as the shots seemed to diminish and grow dimmer in the distance.

"What do you reckon is on behind?" the red-head asked, holstering his guns.

In the light of the fire-door, his hair seemed alive and flaming. His hands, riding easily on the hips of waist overalls, were big, his fingers spatulate, and the easy crinkling grin of the wide mouth beneath his snubbed and freckled nose brought an answering smile from the engineer.

"They're all there. I can tell by the way she pulls," the engineer said. He mopped the sweat from his brow with a grimy handkerchief. "There was three mine payrolls in that baggage-car safe, and if they don't give you one of 'em, son then—"

The sentence went unfinished, for the red-head had waved carelessly and disappeared over the tender.

"Now, just who the hell is he?" the fireman asked slowly.

The red-head made his way uncertainly over the catwalk atop the baggage car to the far end, where he swung down upon the platform. The door to the baggage car was open and he lounged in.

"That's the ranny," some one said

from a group collected around a man lying on the floor. One lamp flickered dimly overhead and the red-head noticed that every one on the train was collected in this car.

Hoagy Henshaw turned around and peered through myopic eyes at the figure in the doorway. His gun nosed up unsteadily at the sudden apparition. "How'd you know this stickup was comin' off?"

The red-head shrugged and pulled a tobacco sack from his shirt pocket. There was a glint of amusement in his eyes as he looked at the brakeman, then at the dark man who had been his seat-mate in the passenger coach, now standing beside the gambler.

"I was tryin' to sleep and I seen that jasper in the seat ahead of me signalin' out into the night with matches. He got up. I followed him out. He was tryin' to uncouple the car. That's all I know." His voice was low, good-humored, calm under the threat of the brakie's gun.

"Well, he's dead," Hoagy said, "and nobody saw him do nothin' out of the way. We got only your word for it, and it seems to me you know a little too much about what was goin' to happen."

"He's right, Hoagy," the gambler put in. "I saw the man lighting matches myself and wondered about it."

Hoagy's eyes swiveled to the gambler and the nose of his gun dropped.

"All right, Quinn. I'll take your word for it." He looked at the red-head. "But I'm goin' to talk to the train crew first, before I let you go. There's somethin' funny about this." He turned to Quinn again. "I'll expect you to answer for him."

"He don't need to," the red-head drawled mildly. "I ain't goin' to jump the train."

Hoagy nodded grimly and addressed the group.

"You better clear out now. If the gov'ment knowed I let you in here, I'd lose my job."

Back in the passenger coach the black-haired puncher introduced the gambler to the red-head.

"Rosy, this is Martin Quinn." To the gambler he said: "This here is the hero of the train robbery, or the robber. I dunno which. Name's Rosy Rand."



AFTER shaking hands, they all sat down in the gambler's seat.

"What was the shot in here, Dave?" Rand asked his partner. "Didn't I hear one?"

"Turner here—" Quinn began. Suddenly, he stood up and glanced around the car. "Well I'll be damned," he said, amazement slowing his voice. "He's gone. He hightailed it while we were out of the car." He laughed, then explained to the red-head what the shooting had been about. He turned to Turner as he finished. "I'm obliged to you for that, Turner. He'd have let that thing off in my face in another second."

"Who was he? Ever seen him before?" Rand asked.

Turner shook his head. "There's not a stuffed Stetson yet that didn't think he could choose a gambler on any grounds of his own makin'."

Quinn nodded, smiling. "That's about it. I used to know an old-timer who said if a gambler changes his name once a month and keeps on the move, he's got an even chance of outlivin' a dumb rustler."

Turner laughed. "And I've heard him say it. It was Dipper-Mouth Hartley, wasn't it?"

"He's the one," Quinn said. "I thought he'd be before your time. I'd been led to believe he was in the Yuma pen."

"That's where I knew him," Turner said briefly.

"Sorry," Quinn said. "That was none of my business."

He studied the two men before him with the acuteness of a man shrewd in the judgment of men. Turner was perhaps ten pounds lighter than Rand, two

inches shorter. But they both bore the same stamp, that of quiet men, young, slow in judgment, quick in action. He knew the kind. Steel toughened in the fire of experience, old beyond their years, wanting nothing so much as to be let alone.

It mattered not at all to the gambler that Turner had been in prison. A glance at him told Quinn that it had left him untouched, with none of the sourness, the bitterness, and the hate that prison breeds. They were both young, perhaps twenty-five, dressed in the soft, oft-washed range clothes of waist overalls and blue shirt.

They looked up to see Hoagy shuffling down the aisle intoning to the car: "Single Shot. Five minutes to Single Shot."

He stopped by their seat and looked judiciously at Rand. "I been up to the cab talkin' with the boys. They tell me you pulled 'em out of a tight spot."

Rand squirmed. "All they needed was to run the engine."

Hoagy shook his head and persisted. "I'm goin' into Walpais on this run. I'll tell the super. There may be some money in it for you."

Rand's face flushed uncomfortably. "They can keep it."

But Hoagy was persistent. "Look here. He'll want to do somethin' for you. There was three mine payrolls in that baggage-car safe."

Rand thought a minute. "All right. If he wants to do somethin', have him write the warden at Yuma and tell him."

"Warden? Yuma?" Hoagy said slowly.

"I'm out on parole," Rand told him. Hoagy shook his head, but took Rand's name and left.

"He doesn't believe you," Turner said.

"Neither do I," Quinn put in.

"It's a fact," Rand said.

Turner's nod confirmed him. Quinn shook his head slowly, looking from one to the other.

"If a gambler's word in a tight place will do you any good, let me know. I'll be at the Free Throw in Single Shot."

"We'll be neighbors then," Turner said. "My dad's got a spread near there."

Hoagy's voice droned through the car. "Single Shot. Single Shot."

CHAPTER II

WHISTLE STOP JOHN LAW



THE Sierra Blancos, towering the hundred miles of their east-west length in snow-capped aloofness, must have looked down at the town of Single Shot with a degree of tolerance, since this irregular and shabby cowtown had been allowed to remain at the mouth of its deep valley for more than forty years. The valley cut a deep gash back into the mountains, a gigantic knife-thrust that had for its core only a wide and gravelly stream bed.

At the foot of the valley on the bank of this dry stream bed lay the town, an affair of one main street and two weak cross streets. South of the town lay the foothills sloping in three stippled swells to the semi-arid plains many miles below.

Looming up as a mountain in its own right, to the west of the town and a little to the south lay Coahuila Butte, a spur of Old Cartridge, itself one of the proud members of the Blancos. To the east, more mountains, but low, over which the train had labored this night to coast triumphantly and noisily into the station.

Dave was glued to the window, Rosy behind him, lifting down their warbags.

"See her?" Rosy asked.

Dave's answer was long in coming. "No. Reckon she didn't get my letter after all."

"She'll likely be at the hotel," Rosy said. He stooped down to look out the window at the town. A glance was

enough. The station fronted the main street, a broad, string-straight road fetlock deep in dust, flanked by boardwalks under wooden awnings and an almost unbroken line of hitchracks. A good many of the false-front stores of weathered clapboard were lighted, hipshot ponies and teams harnessed to buckboards blinking in the light they cast out into the street.

"I don't think so," Dave said quietly. "If I hadn't seen my sister for eight years, I reckon I wouldn't wait for her in a hotel. I reckon Mary wouldn't wait for me there, either."

They were the last two out of the car and as they descended to the station platform, Dave's eyes roved the small crowd for a sign of his sister. An uncontrollable bitterness came over him as he realized she was not there. She, too, then, had been ashamed to be seen in public with a jail-bird brother. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Ain't you Dave Turner?" a slow, flat voice asked him.

Dave turned. Confronting him was a fat, shapeless man, looking like nothing so much as two hundred-odd pounds of soiled clothes topped by a greasy Stetson. He wore ragged, saber mustaches below a thick-nostriled nose and his eyes were colorless, unblinking, red-rimmed. Where his chest sloped to his belly, a star reposed, the only neat thing about him except the twin butts of Colts that sagged just above his knees. Dave recognized him at once.

"Sure. I'm Dave Turner. You're Sheriff Lowe—still," Dave said dryly. Neither of them offered to shake hands.

"Uh-huh. Still." The sheriff's eyes did not blink. "Come on this train?"

"Yeah," Dave drawled. He waited a moment. "I bought a ticket, if that's what worryin' you."

"It ain't worryin' me," the sheriff said in his flat, unemotional voice.

Dave's eyes ignored him as they searched the platform again for Mary.

"Lookin' for your sister?"

Dave looked at him, waiting a moment before he answered. "Uh-huh. I figgered she'd meet me here."

"She won't," the sheriff declared flatly.

Dave's eyes narrowed a little. "No? She knew I was comin'."

"I reckon she knew. Everybody does."

"Then where is she?"

"Soledad."

"Soledad? Why there? I asked her to meet me here."

"That's what she said." The sheriff's statement was careless, almost agreeable.

Dave looked at him curiously and when he spoke his voice was soft, mild. "What's all this about, Hank? I asked Mary to meet me here. She doesn't do it, and you do."

"Got any objections to me meetin' a train?" the sheriff asked.

"I'd object to you anywhere," Dave said slowly, "and you know it. You say Mary's in Soledad. I'm asking why."

"Ain't Soledad as close to your spread as Single Shot?" The sheriff countered, ignoring Dave's thrust.

"Sure. What of it?"

"Nothin'. If I was you, I'd go to Soledad and meet her there."

"Did she tell you to tell me that?" Dave asked quietly.

"Uh-uh."

There was a carefully guarded edge of exasperation on Dave's voice as he asked: "Then how do you know she'll be there?"

"I don't. I just guess she will. I told her you'd meet her there."

Dave was quiet a long moment. "You haven't got the guts to say it right out, have you, Hank?"

A small group of loafers had collected in a wide circle around them listening.

"I reckon I have. Get out," the sheriff said flatly.

Dave laughed softly, his eyes sultry and smouldering.

"Why?" he asked bluntly.

"I got enough trouble without lettin' more of it walk right into town."

"I'm out," Dave said slowly. "I didn't escape from prison. I was pardoned. You were never very sure of the right in that case in the first place, were you, Hank?"

"The jury was. I'm not here to row that over agin'," the sheriff said.

"Neither am I," Dave said softly. "I took my whippin'. Eight years of it, for killin' a horse-thief that deserved killin'. I'm out now." He paused, watching the sheriff. "I'm goin' anywhere I damned well please."

"I reckon not. Not if you aim to come here," the sheriff persisted.

A new voice broke into the conversation, Quinn's.

"These two men fought off a train robbery tonight, Sheriff. If that's not law-abiding enough for you, what is?"

The sheriff turned his expressionless gaze on Quinn, who held it steadily.

"Who tolled you in on this?" he asked quietly.

"Nobody," Quinn said mildly. "Somebody's given you a bum steer. I'm tryin' to give you a right one."

"If I was you and had business to mind, I'd mind it," the sheriff answered.

"That's good advice," Quinn conceded. "It might apply to you, too." He turned to Dave. "When I see some of these whistle-stop John Laws, I sometimes wish my old man had been hung for rustlin'," he drawled insolently. "Mark of honor in some cases, I'd call it." He waved a negligent farewell to Dave and Rosy and turned on his heel.

The sheriff's eyes barely flickered. "You only been in this town two weeks. Mebbe you'd like to ride out with Turner?"

Quinn stopped and turned deliberately to face the sheriff. Very slowly he placed on his head the black, shapeless Stetson he had been carrying. "When you run Turner out of town for good, Sheriff, then you can start on me," he said in a

low voice. "Very likely, by that time I'll be willing to go."

"I'll remember that," the sheriff said.

"I doubt if you will," Quinn replied. "I doubt if you'll be in any condition to." He turned and walked slowly off around the corner.

At this moment the train bell clanged, announcing its departure. Hoagy, who had been listening to the argument, laid a hand on Dave's arm.

"If she's waitin' in Soledad, you better climb on."

"Thanks, Hoagy," Dave said, without taking his eyes from the sheriff's fat face. "Hank, I dunno when I'll be in Single Shot, but when I take a notion, I'll be in."

"Try it," the sheriff drawled.

"I don't savvy this," Dave said slowly. "You tryin' to make fight talk, Hank?"

"Huh-uh. Not me."

"Then what's wrong with my goin' in to Single Shot if I don't start trouble?"

"Try it," the sheriff reiterated.

Dave's jaw clamped shut with a little click.

"I'll do that. I'd do it now if Mary wasn't waitin' in Soledad."

He paused and regarded the sheriff, breathing a little deeply.

"Hank, I got a lifetime to live in this country, about twelve miles from Single Shot. I aim to be peaceful. But if you think I'm goin' to stay out of this town just because you don't happen to like me, take another guess."

"This ain't a guess," the sheriff said.

The train gave a jerk. Rosy was already on the steps, watching. Dave swung up.

"You can't make it stick, fat man," he said, his drawl thick and slow. "I don't reckon I'll have much business in Single Shot, but when I do, I'm coming in."

The sheriff stood flat-footedly, watching the train pull out, a look of mild surprise on his face.



CHAPTER III

GUNS FOR THE DRY-GULCHERS



THERE was no reason why Soledad should not have been the prosperous town that Single Shot was. By rail they were twelve miles apart, both nestled high in the foothills. Legend had it that a prospector coming in from the west on the train had spent all his available cash to reach Soledad. He disliked Mexicans, and when he saw that he was being put off at a town composed mostly of Mexicans he traded the conductor a prospector's pick, a compass and a plug of tobacco for a ride on to Single Shot.

There, he traveled up the canyon to the north, found gold, and started the rush which had lifted the sleepy cattle town into a mining town also and left Soledad a clean, sunburnt huddle of

adobes squatting around a frame general store and a small whitewashed church.

The sun-blistered station seemed to have part of the prospector's arrogance, since it too had decided not to settle in town, but lay aloof four or five hundred yards from the nearest building, turning its back on the town, preferring the blue mists of the far mesas and the low-lying dry plains below it and to the south.

Even at night it kept its individuality, burning two bright lights at train time, while the windows of the few adobes gleamed soft and mysterious and humble behind it.

When the thrashing locomotive had labored its way around Coahuila Butte, the chief physical obstacle separating the two towns, it subsided into the station, disgorging two lone passengers, cow-punchers, warbags in hand.

A small figure ran quickly from the

shadows of the station, saying one word: "Dave!"

She was in his arms, laughing a little with the sudden easing off of a tension that had been growing for eight years. Dave held her at arm's length, his hands on her shoulders.

"Mary," he said simply, huskily. "Why, I reckon—I—why you're beautiful, sis. But where's the corn-colored hair? It's brown and nice and crinkly now. Those same eyes, though; only a little of the mischief has gone out of them."

A slight flush diffused the girl's face and her wide moist eyes looked at him with affection, with a serenity in their brown depths. She was half a head shorter than Dave, but straight, erect as a cavalryman in her riding breeches and white, open-necked shirt. Her body was slender, yet full and rounded, and her unconscious movements were quick and graceful. She laughed huskily, deep in her throat, a laugh full of emotion.

"But Dave, my hair turned, just like mother's. But you haven't changed. You've filled out, but you still look as if you were going to play a trick on the devil himself. Those eyes give you away."

They laughed together.

"Haven't you forgotten something, Dave?"

She didn't wait for an answer, but turned to Rosy, who was standing politely a few yards away.

"You're Rosy Rand Dave wrote about. I'm Mary." She extended her hand and Rosy took it, mumbling something that was lost in the sudden thickness of his tongue.

"Did you come alone, Mary?" Dave asked.

"Yes. I like to ride alone. Don't you remember?"

Rosy looked at Dave and grinned. "There you are, big brother."

They walked behind the station to where the horses were hitched. Mary

stopped her chatter long enough to laugh a little.

"I brought a big bay for Mr. Rand. You wrote me he was so big, Dave."

"I didn't lie, did I?"

They found their horses. Dave's hand rubbed up against something slung from the saddle horn and he looked at it.

"What's this, sis?" he said slowly. "Guns?"

Mary hesitated a moment before answering. "Yes. I didn't know whether you'd have any or not."

Dave looked through the dark at her, trying to see her face. "Is there anything wrong?" he asked.

"No. Not especially. I—I just didn't know whether you'd have them or not."

Thoughtfully, without talking, Dave tied his warbag on the saddle. There was something behind this he didn't understand yet. He'd have to find out.



MARY kept up a continual stream of animated talk as they rode through the town, headed north in the direction of the mountains. Everything that had happened on the spread that Dave might want to know, she told him, including Rosy as if he were an old friend. Dave listened contentedly, laughing occasionally at Mary's excitement, loving her spirit and brightness.

Soon he found his opportunity to speak. They were far from town, riding abreast, the night was warm and friendly, a smell of sagebrush was in the thin air. It seemed as if nothing could be wanting on this night to make it complete, but a nagging doubt goaded him.

"Is there something wrong, Mary? What is it? Why did you bring the guns?"

"Is that so strange in this country, Dave?"

"For you, yes. Remember, it was a gun that sent me to jail, Mary. I'm bein' a little careful how I use one after this."

"Well, it was a combination of everything, Dave. The sheriff warned me not to meet you in Single Shot because he wouldn't let you off the train there. I thought there might be an argument. If it was a bad one, it would be pretty wise to carry a gun, wouldn't it?"

"You've got to do better than that, Mary," Dave said quietly. "Sheriffs don't bushwhack. Besides, I'm twenty miles from needin' a gun right now. What is it?"

Mary sighed. "All right. I'll tell you." Her voice was grave, and Rosy noticed a little of the life had gone from it when she spoke. "Do you remember those three sections on our south line right against the badlands that dad always wanted to ditch for hay?"

"And never did. Sure."

"There are five families of nesters on there now," Mary said slowly. "They hate us. Finnegan—one of the hands—went down and they took his gun away from him when he ordered them off. I don't know whether they're really bad or not, Dave, but maybe they think your coming home will mean that they will be kicked off. They might—"

"—take a notion to take a crack at me," Dave finished. "Is that it?"

"Now you know," Mary said quietly.

"Maybe," Dave said dubiously. "Why haven't they been kicked off?"

"Who would do it? None of the hands seem interested."

"What about the sheriff?"

"Help our family? He barely speaks to me on the street. You see, he still holds that kid's foolishness against you."

It was the first reference to Dave's prison term and he was glad Mary was open about it. He began to realize bitterly that the years of prison had been torture for some one besides himself. Evidently people thought they could run over his sister or else ignore her because he had been in prison. Things would change then, and mighty quick.

He thought about the nesters, reflect-

ing on what Mary had told him. So they were tough enough that Mary thought they would try to bushwhack him? Nesters, those poor, hard-working, stubborn men who wished nothing so much as to be let alone. It didn't fit. He tried to see Mary's face in the dark, but he couldn't. A deep doubt urged him to speak again and when he did it was calmly, quietly, probingly.

"And what else, sis? What else made you bring the guns?"

"I told you."

"What else besides that?" he persisted.

Mary sighed. "You were stubborn as a kid, Dave, and I see you haven't changed. Must I tell you everything tonight?"

"Sure. Now." And Dave grinned in the dark.

She laughed a little. "Well, it's Hammond. You've not heard of him, have you?"

"Who's he? Another nester?"

"No. He's a mine owner. He's bought up land just above Single Shot. You know where the trail goes into the notch just behind Coahuila Butte and down the mountainside into Single Shot?"

"Sure."

"And you know how steep the mountainside is? How the only way you can get down it is through that dry wash? Well, he's built a mine, the Draw Three, right at the mouth of that wash at the bottom of the slope."

"What about it?" Dave said.

"Wait a minute. Do you remember, too, that little lake just below Old Cartridge that's so close to the edge of the rim-rock?"

"Of course. That's all our water, isn't it?"

"It still is," Mary said. "Well, the lake is only a few yards from the rock rim and our boundary. Hammond, when he bought the mine, said that in the deed there was a lake mentioned. He claims his land comes over the rock rim to the lake."

Dave's mouth sagged. "Lake? Why, it's ours. When dad registered that land, he took a hundred and sixty acres off the west and put it on the east so as to include the lake. Why doesn't Hammond look it up?"

"Oh, it's all so stupid, Dave. The maps show that section perfectly square, shows the lake off our land. I've shown him the papers and everything else, but the map is drawn wrong and he won't believe me. He threatens to take it to law if we haven't given in by the time he needs the water."

"When will that be?" Dave asked grimly.

"I don't know. When he gets the mine along further and get's into gravel. He wants it for sluicing then."

Dave laughed softly. "That's gall for fair. Just because he let some forked jasper sell him a lake with the help of an inaccurate map, he thinks he can take it away from us. We're supposed to give him all our water because he got the worst of a horse-trade. Is that it?"

"He seems to think so," Mary said wearily.

"And what does the sheriff think about that?" Dave asked sardonically.

"He won't have anything to do with it," Mary said. "He says that fight belongs to the land office and if the Turners are crooks, then it's up to Hammond to catch us at it."

"That slob," Dave said bitterly. "So the Turners are crooks. I'd like to have dad here to tell that to."

"I don't think I like that sheriff," Rosy drawled.

"He's all right," Dave said. "A good man. He's dumb and patient, but he's honest. When he get's riled, though, watch out. You'd never know it, but that big fat jasper has got a draw that's as soft and quick as a whisper. He's never been afraid in his life. Never will be, I reckon."

"Some people are too dumb to be afraid," Rosy said.



THE FAR yipe of a coyote came to Dave's ears, interrupting his thoughts. The night was soft and quiet, the far, countless stars semaphoring silently. Trouble, and more trouble. Hammond's claim was too preposterous to be considered. But the nesters. They must go. "What about the courts, Mary?" Dave asked presently, out of a reverie. "Those nesters haven't any right there, have they?"

Mary laughed slightly. "We have no money, Dave. I guess I forgot to mention that. The two men we've got left haven't been paid regularly in a year." A sudden huskiness caught her throat. "It's not much to hand over to you, I know, but I just couldn't do better."

"Never mind," Dave said quietly. "We've got the land and the water and the grass. Banks loan money, so we'll have cattle."

"The bank has loaned money, Dave," Mary said. "They won't loan us any more. A good slice of the paper is due in a few days, too." Her voice was suddenly bitter. "That's another present for you, Dave, from a loving sister."

"Stop it, Mary," Dave said softly. "I hate to hear you bitter like that."

"I know," Mary said contritely. "I'm sorry. You're the one that has the right to be bitter." She looked at him. "And you aren't and I'm glad, Dave. It would have spoiled you."

Dave wondered if he wasn't. Surely, the past eight years had been enough to make him bitter, as he looked back on it now. But all that was past. He was free now, had land of his own, and a future ahead of him. And he was with the two people he loved and respected above all others.

They fell into single file now as the road narrowed between two canyons and slanted steeply up-hill. He remembered the place. These were the small badlands that announced the deep gently sloping plateau—the Soledad Bench, it

was called—on which the D Bar T, his spread, was located. Behind the Bench, mountains begin to lift into jagged, rocky foothills, then into peaks.

He recognized each landmark. Here was that arroyo across the road, bridged, now, where he had piled up the buckboard with those two fuzz-tails he had been breaking in and was foolish enough to try to drive to town. Right here by this pinnacle rock, just over the bridge, and a ways into the badlands was where he had found those five little wolves that he took home and nursed to Dinah, the ranch dog, until they got so wild and savage that he reluctantly killed them and collected the bounty.

All of it, every inch of it, barren land and fertile, held some such association. How could he be bitter coming back to this?

Mary was ahead of him and he spoke to her softly. "Don't worry, sis. The black days haven't come to the Turners yet. Not for—"

Crash!

A spouting mushroom of fire winked from the high rim-rock and Dave felt a searing slap on the top of his head that swept him off his horse into falling unconsciousness.

Rosy's gun streaked up in coughing, savage lances of flame and a thin, wailing scream took up the echo of the shots.

Mary was kneeling by Dave as Rosy fought his horse quiet and leaped off.

"Get him?" he asked hoarsely.

"I can't tell," Mary answered in a tight, frozen voice.

Rosy struck a match. In its light they could see a raw smear of red on the top of Dave's head, the blood oozing out from under the thick, black hair. Rosy put his ear to Dave's chest, listened a moment, then raised up.

"Pumpin' like a locomotive," he announced cheerfully. "He's out cold and lost some skin. I reckon that's all."

Mary was sobbing softly and Rosy patted her shoulder tenderly, awkwardly.

"It's all right, Miss Mary." He gulped. "If they killed him, I reckon I'd just go hog wild."

Mary nodded. "So—so would I."

"There's a *hombre* up on the hill, I think," Rosy said. "I'm goin' to take a *pasear*. You tie this handkerchief around his head. He'll come to pretty quick."

Rosy left the road and scrambled up the steep canyon wall, sliding back occasionally as the soft rubble gave way with him. On the rim he saw a sprawled, prone figure, resting face downward on the stock of a shotgun. Rosy turned him over and struck a match. He was a thick-set man, dressed in soiled denim pants, greasy shirt and tattered vest. A wreck of a hat lay by him.

He was unshaven and just where the stubble of beard ceased to grow on his neck, a thin stream of blood trickled from a hole. He was dead already, his surly face shrunken and blue from the loss of blood. Rosy let the match die, waited until his eyes became accustomed to the dark again and peered off into the night, listening.

A scraping hoof gave him the clue he was waiting for and he walked over to a ground-haltered horse. He led the horse over to the rim-rock, loaded the man across the saddle and after walking south for a hundred yards found the arroyo which led down to the road.

Mary was waiting for him.

"He hasn't come to, yet," she said fighting the tears back.

"He will. Don't worry. The best thing we can do is hurry on to the spread, where we can do somethin' for him."

"Yes," Mary said weakly. With an effort, she spoke again. "Who is it?"

"Dunno," Rosy said, then added quickly. "He ain't much to look at. Better wait and see if Dave knows him."

"I want to see," Mary said firmly.

Rosy reluctantly struck a match, wondering if the man would turn out to be some one she knew. Mary peered at the

man and Rosy let the flame die quickly.

"Is it one of them nesters?" he asked.

"I've never seen him before."

Rosy's scowl gave way to a look of surprise.

"You know all them nesters?"

"Yes. This man is not one of them."

Rosy shrugged. "Reckon you can lead this horse? I'll put Dave up in front of me and lead his horse. How far we got to go?"

"Three miles."

Together they managed to hoist Dave to the saddle while Rosy mounted behind him, his left arm encircling Dave's body to hold it upright and rein the horse, his right holding the leading rein of Dave's horse. Mary led the dead man's pony and took the lead.



THE Turner ranch lay on the sheltered side of a large draw with sloping grassy sides which served as a windbreak. Tall sycamores mushroomed up in the black night, hiding everything about the house but the two spacious and lighted windows. Rosy could make out a broad creek below the house and the barns and outbuildings to the rear against the hill.

No one greeted them as they dismounted. Rosy took Dave in his arms and followed Mary into the house. They entered a broad, low-ceiled room, a huge fireplace at one end, the dark floor brightened by Navajo rugs, its timbered ceiling glowing darkly with the fire's reflection. Rosy did not see the man seated in a deep chair before the fire as he laid Dave on a davenport next to the inner wall of the room.

"Well, Mary," the man drawled.

Rosy looked up. The speaker was young, perhaps thirty, with a dark, coolly appraising face. He was dressed in whipcord breeches and shiny boots, slouched comfortably on his backbone in the easy chair. He had just laid down a book and was stroking a care-

fully clipped black mustache, a look of amiable curiosity on his face.

"Oh, Ted," Mary said, a little catch of fear in her voice. "Some one shot Dave—!" She looked at Rosy and flushed a little. "Excuse me. Mr. Rand, my husband, Ted Winters."

Winters nodded lazily. "Welcome, Rand."

"Howdy," Rosy said. He looked curiously at Mary and she interpreted his look correctly.

"I wanted to surprise Dave," she said, flushing a little deeper.

Rosy nodded indifferently. "Better get some water."

"What happened to the favorite son?" Winters drawled.

He lounged out of his chair and came over beside Rosy, looking down at the unconscious figure on the davenport. Mary left for the kitchen.

"Some whippoorwill on the dry-gulch," Rosy said briefly.

"Where?"

"This side of the bridge. Forted up on top the ridge with a shotgun."

"The devil!" Winters exclaimed, frowning. "Who would want to do that?"

"I dunno. He's out there on a horse now. Take a look at him and see if you know him."

"You mean you got him?" Winters asked, a light of admiration and surprise creeping into his eyes.

Rosy nodded.

"Alive?" Winters asked.

"Dead," Rosy said dryly.

Mary returned with the basin containing warm water and a mild disinfectant. She kneeled by Dave and bathed the wound, her face white and drawn with strain.

"Ted, it was awful," she said in a low voice, not taking her eyes from Dave. "We were riding single file, just over the bridge put in last summer. The man must have had cat's eyes. He—"

"Rand told me," Winters interrupted. "I can't imagine any one who would want to kill Dave."

The disinfectant Mary had put in the water was biting into the raw flesh of Dave's wound and he groaned and writhed under the pain. His eyelids fluttered, then opened. He stared blankly around the room a moment, then his gaze fell on Mary. He smiled weakly.

"What happened? Somebody shot at me." His eyes traveled to Rosy questioningly.

"Some whippoorwill up in the rocks tried to blow your head off," Rosy said grinning.

Dave nodded weakly and shifted his eyes to Winters, who was still regarding him in silence.

"You the doc?" Dave asked him.

"No, Dave. This is Ted Winters, my husband," Mary said. "I wanted to keep it a secret and surprise you. I would have, for—" her voice trailed off as she searched Dave's face for a sign. Dave looked at her steadily.

"Well, sis, this is a surprise." He stretched his arm out to Winters and they shook hands, Dave smiling weakly. "You got the best girl I ever knew, Winters," he said simply.

"I know it," Winters replied. He put his arm around Mary's shoulder and she hugged him tightly, looking down at Dave.

Rosy was searching Dave's face, keenly, silently, wondering.

"How do you feel?" Mary asked.

"Good. I'll be up tomorrow. What was this all about?"

"He's out there dead—on a horse," Winters said. "Rand brought him home to stuff." He laughed easily, showing fine, even teeth.

"Who was he? Doesn't any one know him?"

"I'm going out and take a look," Winters said. "I'll put up your horses while I'm at it."



"Want some—" Rosy began, but Winters waved him away.

"No. I'll put our friend in the tool shed. You stay here, Rand." He left by the front door and Mary and Dave looked at each other.

"You little devil!" Dave said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want it all to come at once," Mary replied, laughing shyly. "Can you walk to bed? I think some sleep would do you good and we can talk it over in the morning."

Dave nodded. Leaning on Rosy's shoulder, he walked with dragging footsteps down the middle corridor of the one-story house. Mary opened a door to a bedroom, containing a broad white bed in one corner, a cot in the opposite corner, and a simple, unpainted chest of drawers.

"It's not been changed, Dave," Mary said.

She drew back the bedspread and shook the pillow. Dave looked around the room with weary eyes, noting every familiar detail.

"Mr. Rand, you have the room next door—or you can sleep here on the cot. We're just across the hall, so don't think we won't hear him if anything happens in the night."

"Meanin' if I die," Dave teased her.

Mary laughed and kissed him, bid them both good night, and left the room. Dave looked around the room thoughtfully.

"A little different from a ten by six cell, eh? You'll like it here, Rosy."

Rosy sat on the cot, drew a Durham sack from his pocket and rolled a cigarette slowly, careful to keep his eyes from meeting Dave's.

"A little different," Dave echoed himself. He strolled to the bed and sat down.

Rosy lighted his cigarette slowly, then looked up at Dave.

"I'm hittin' the grit tomorrow, pardner," he announced calmly. Dave stifled the surprise in his eyes and looked long at Rosy.

"What's the matter?" he asked presently, quietly. "Is it what Mary said about our bein' broke?"

Rosy's eyes dropped evasively. "It ain't that. I reckon I ain't ready to settle down yet. I want to wear out a couple more saddles before I pick me a corral."

"And leave me here, stuck with a bunch of land-grabbin' nesters, a water-thievin' fool, a proddy sheriff, and a bushwhackin'?" Dave said.

Rosy flushed and his freckles seemed to fade under the sudden rush of blood to his face.

"You don't need me. I can't help. I'd be in the way."

"All right, you red-headed rannie,"

Dave said, "we'll go together. Tomorrow mornin'."

"And leave things this way for Mary?" Rosy asked, unbelievably. "You wouldn't be that low-down ornery."

"If you go, I go," Dave said firmly.

Rosy regarded him a moment, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Look here. It's this way. I'm goin' because I don't hanker livin' off folks that ain't got enough to spare. I'd stay, Dave, and work, but my work would bring you in nothin' and you'd feel bad because you couldn't pay me wages."

"Part of that's true," Dave said. "But give us a chance. I can't get this spread runnin' again with no help. We still got everything we ever had and one day we'll have her where she was; ten men workin' plenty, not countin' the cook and blacksmith. How am I goin' to do it if you run out on me?"

"You can do it," Rosy insisted stubbornly.

"I can, but I won't. You go, I go," Dave said. "We planned this thing out together and then you run out on me. All right, I can run out on Mary."

"You jughead, you will not," Rosy growled. He crossed to Dave's bed and gently shoved him back into a lying position. "Stick up your foot and I'll pull them boots off. If you leaned over, the dang few brains you got would trickle out in a half-inch puddle through that hole in your head. Git some sleep. We're up by sun-up. You want a bandage on that head?"

"If it'll make you any happier to play nurse, go ahead," Dave prodded him.

"You go to hell. And you can pull off your own boots."

Rosy undressed slowly, thoughtfully. When he was ready to climb into bed in the cot he spoke to Dave.

"Just why do you reckon that jasper shot at you?"

No answer. He looked up, in the act of blowing out the light. Dave was asleep.

CHAPTER IV

SADDLE BUM'S SALARY



DAVE and Rosy were up before sunrise the next morning. Save for his paleness, Dave seemed none the worse for the events of the night before. After building a fire in the big kitchen range, he and Rosy strolled out to look the place over. A feeling of depression came over them both when they had looked around.

The house was as it had always been and always would be, so long as any one was living in it. It was a stone affair with a low, sloping, slate roof. It was planned roughly in the form of an I, the long living room being the base, the four bedrooms along the corridor the shank and the dining room and kitchen the top. The sycamores and cottonwoods, old and gnarled, spread their canopy high above it. From the front of the house the ground sloped gently to the willow-shaded creek a hundred yards distant.

The buildings were different. The board cook-shack was empty, its windows gray and filled with cobwebs. The adobe bunkhouse, a long straight building runneled with rains, the bricks showing in places where the mud plaster had cracked off in sheets, lay between the cook-shack and corrals.

The barn itself seemed falling to pieces, its door sagging, wisps of hay sticking out the weathered cracks like hair out of a battered sombrero. The corrals were awry, some of their bars down, their space clotted with manure.

"Looks like some one had just moved out," Dave growled.

"Lot of work ahead," Rosy conceded. They went over to the corrals and looked at the horses, perhaps a dozen in all. They were fat, but uncurried and shaggy, giving them a dispirited and crestfallen appearance.

"Which horse was Little Bo-Peep ridin'?" Dave asked.

"That black with a white stockin'. Let's see the brand."

They cut the horse out, and while Rosy stroked his nose, Dave looked for the brand.

"Naked as a baby," he announced. "That don't help much."

"That horse is five years old if he's a day," Rosy said. "Who's loco enough to let his horses go antigodlin' around without a brand? He must be rich."

"Or dumb."

"Want to see that jasper?" Rosy asked.

"Not till I've eaten," Dave said, making a wry face. "Besides, if sis don't know him I won't."

At that moment, Mary called them from the kitchen door. Inside, they found she had breakfast nearly ready. Dave looked at the round table in the kitchen and noticed five places.

"Who's comin' for breakfast, sis?" he asked, after Mary had inquired after his health.

"No one," Mary said brightly. "Those are for the hands."

Dave was silent a moment. "You cookin' for the hands?"

Both were well aware of that tradition that draws a line between a big ranch and a little one, a cow outfit and a farm, a cattleman and a homesteader. It dictated that the rancher's wife did not wait on, cook for, or serve the ranch hands.

"Of course," Mary said lightly. "We haven't had a cook for three years, Dave."

Dave nodded and was silent, prowling about the kitchen.

"Can I do anything?" Rosy asked uncomfortably.

Mary turned to him and laughed.

"You can, Mr. Rand. I haven't much wood and there's none split. Would you mind splitting enough to get through breakfast on?"

"Not Mr. Rand to you, ma'am," Rosy said. "I ain't ever been called anything but Rosy all my life. Sometimes I think

I'll wake up some mornin' and find myself a girl." His grin was friendly.

"All right, Rosy. Then I'm Mary to you, and not ma'am. It makes me feel forty anyway. The wood is out at the end of the cook-shack. I think you'll find the axe there too."

Rosy dodged out the door, and Mary and Dave were alone. Dave's face was clouded. Mary looked up at him and saw he was scowling, looking out the window.

"Rotten homecoming, isn't it?" she said in a low voice.

Dave nodded. "Seeing a ranch in this shape almost makes me want to howl." He looked at Mary and grinned, then shook his head. "You must have a couple of prime knotheads for hands, sis. Most people couldn't let a spread get in this shape if they tried."

Mary flushed. "They do most of their work all right. What they're told to do anyway."

"Then why is everything so run-down?" Dave asked gently. "Why there's stuff here that wouldn't take twenty minutes fixin' but nobody's done it. Why?"

Mary was bending over the stove and she did not look up. "It's Ted, Dave. He's been running the place for two years now, ever since old Link died. But he's no cattle man." She looked up and her face was flushed. "But I guess you've noticed that already."

"Sorry," Dave muttered.

"He's a mining man, Dave, not a rancher. He's pulled us through the best he knows how, and I guess he'd be the first to admit that he hasn't done a good job."

"Sure," Dave said. "Forget it."

He wished now that he hadn't mentioned it at all. He listened a moment.

"Where is he this mornin'? Around the place?"

Mary was still bending over the range. "He's in bed," she said quietly. "He's a

city man and thinks we're barbarians to get up with the sun."

Dave wanted her to look at him, but she didn't. He laughed uneasily.

"Maybe we are," he conceded lightly. "Tell me about him, sis. Where'd you meet him and when did you marry him? All I know is that you've got a husband."

"Dad met him one day. He was an agent for a mine and he was scouting around looking over this country. Dad liked him and offered him a string of good horses because his own were pretty poor. He used to come over quite a lot after that and—well, we just liked each other and decided to get married."

"After Dad died?"

"Yes. A couple of months." She turned to Dave and he could see the pain in her eyes. "Oh, Dave, it was awful. I was lonesome and discouraged and—I don't know. It just seemed as if Ted was something sent from heaven. He was so kind and sympathetic and helpful."

Dave nodded, rolling a cigarette.

"I know. It was pretty tough. Dad dead and me in jail and this spread on your hands to run alone." He paused, frowning. "What about the place, Sis? I'll have to go to Single Shot today on business. Maybe I could talk to the bank."

Mary looked at him searchingly. "Do you think it's wise? After last night?"

"Likely not," Dave said grimly, "but I don't always do wise things. I'm goin' into town. Now what about the place, the cattle and all."

"There's hardly a corral count, the men tell me," Mary said. "Ted never has been able to get the right tally, but it's low. And there's the paper on the place."

"I'll go to the bank."

"You'll have to. Pearson is still there. He's been awfully good to us. Maybe he'd give us a sixty or ninety day extension, but I don't know what good that will do."

"Plenty," Dave said. "Time's what we need."

"But if nothing happens, Dave, what will we do? And what can happen? We'll have to sell some land to pay off the paper and get enough cattle to stock the range decently. And what if Hammond takes his claim to court?"

"He can't win. It's foolish. We've got the papers to prove it."

"But it will cost us money to fight it, Dave."

"No, it won't," Dave said doggedly. "It'll never get that far. All that jasper needs is to have some one talk salty with him. He'll find out he can't run a sandy on us and then he'll shut up."

"There's always one thing we can do," Mary said speculatively. "We can sell out to him after he finds out he can't bluff us, because it's the only water he can get. I got a letter from a man awhile back—Crowell, I think his name was, asking me to put a price on the ranch. It was just after Hammond threatened to take the case to court, so I put two and two together and figured he was trying to buy the place—that Crowell was Hammond."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I didn't answer him. I got several more letters from him offering money for the place, but I ignored them all."

"Good girl," Dave said, grinning.

"But we could sell to him if we're up against it."

"We won't be," Dave said decisively. He looked at her. "I'd feel like a stray pup anywhere else and so would you. I'm glad you didn't bother to answer him."

"I hoped you'd say that," Mary said, smiling warmly. "I never, never would have sold my half unless I thought you wanted to. And I knew you didn't."

"We won't sell it," Dave said, determination in his voice. "Nobody'll get this place out from under us unless they want to lose some tail feather's doin' it. We've got everything here that it takes to make a ranch. Grass, water, land, buildings—everything but the cattle.

And it'll last, Mary. It'll be here when both our kids are old men. That lake up there by Old Cartridge will always assure water on the place. As long as we don't overstock the range, we're safe."

Mary laughed. "Hardly a chance of our overstocking it now."

Dave laughed with her.



ROSY, loaded with wood, entered just then with two strangers whom Mary introduced as Sod Harmon and Lew Finnegan, the two remaining hands.

Harmon was a tall, bony man of an indeterminate age, with hair so white, skin so pale, that at first Dave thought he was seeing his first albino. All Dave noticed about Finnegan was his dirt and his shifty black eyes. He was small too, Dave noticed afterward, and of course unshaven.

They sat down at table, Mary taking the hotcakes out of the warming oven and setting them on the table.

"Where you ridin' today?" Dave asked Harmon pleasantly.

The blond man looked up and a twisted smile creased his face. "Ridin'?" he growled. "I'm goin' fishin'."

"Not today," Dave said carelessly. "You're cleanin' out that corral first, and rightin' those poles. After that, you can fix that barn door so it don't swing like a rusty beer sign. If I was you, I'd shift that hay in the loft this afternoon, then rustle some boards and patch that barn. After that, I'd get that hayin' machinery—"

"Wait a minute," Harmon said, laying down his fork. "If you was me, you said. Well, you ain't. When I git paid, I work." He turned to Mary. "More flap-jacks," he ordered curtly.

"Please," Dave said softly, laying down his fork.

Harmon stared at him.

"I said, say please when you ask my sister for anything." His voice was thick in a drawl.

Harmon laughed silently and turned to Mary.

"I'm waitin' for those flapjacks, sister."

Dave was out of his chair in a leap. Grasping Harmon by the shirt-front he yanked him to his feet, turned him and drove his fist into the blond man's face, catapulting him over a chair and crashing him full length on the floor.

Finnegan stood up. "Whaddaya' think—"

Rosy's fist smashed his jaw and he sat down abruptly on the floor, his head meeting the stove with a resounding crack.

"What do we owe these saddle-bums, Mary?" Dave asked in a strained, thick voice.

"Sixty dollars apiece, I think," Mary said.

Dave reached in his pocket and drew out some bills, counting them with trembling fingers. He threw them to Finnegan.

"Clear out of here in ten minutes, both of you. If I ever catch you on D Bar T land again, so help me, I'll pistol-whip you both until your own mother'll be sick to look at you. Now get out!"

Finnegan half-carried, half-dragged Harmon out of the kitchen and across to the bunkhouse. Rosy followed them out, watching while they got their few possessions, roped two scrawny horses from the corral, saddled them and rode off.

He leaned on the corral fence, watching them disappear down the dusty road toward Soledad.

"Maybe them black days of the Turners is only gray," he mused.

CHAPTER V

SITTING ON DYNAMITE



DAVE had gone behind the cook-shack out of sight, to strap the gruesome, tarpaulin-wrapped load on the white-

stocking black. Rosy saddled two horses and joined him.

"What's your guess?" Rosy asked.

"Dunno," Dave replied thoughtfully, regarding the wrapped figure. "No brand on his horse, no letters in his pockets, no clothes with a tag. I reckon he's one of these forked coyotes you find in any dive that would cut a throat for a square meal."

"Somebody paid him. Who?"

Dave shrugged. "Every one in the country knows I was comin' home."

"Reckon that *hombre* you cut down on the train would have put him up to it?"

"Couldn't," Dave replied. "He wouldn't have had time to get out there and wait for me."

"The sheriff?"

"Hell no. Not him. Not because he wouldn't like to, but he's too straight."

"Maybe," Rosy said laconically. "A man can hide a lot of cussedness under a tin star."

"No. It wasn't Hank Lowe," Dave said firmly.

They swung into the saddle and headed northeast up the slope behind the house. The trail which Dave had chosen was an old and familiar one, used since he could remember as the shortest way to Single Shot. It wound up and across the Soledad Bench to the notch between the base of Old Cartridge and Coahuila Butte, then dived angling down the steep mountainside to the dry stream bed in the valley and into Single Shot.

Rosy noticed the country had none of the sunbaked gauntness of the plains below. Instead of the canyons there were gently rolling, grass-covered swells with only an occasional rock outcrop. As the trail lifted, piñons gave way to Navajo pines and cedars. The country lay spread out behind them, a series of varied plateaus and mesas mottled with splotches of timber that stretched interminably into the blue haze of the semi-desert far below to the south.

He could see that the D Bar T had

the pick of the range, the tall mountains behind it, the small badlands immediately in front of it, Coahuila Butte, in reality a low mountain to the east, and broad stretches of grassland to the west.

Soon it was noticeable to Rosy that the timber was thinning out and that rock outcrops were more numerous, and they seemed almost at the base of the towering peak of Old Cartridge.

"Up there" —Dave pointed ahead on the trail and a little to the left— "is that spring-fed lake. That's what waters our whole range. She winds through it, back and forth, and it runs water the year round."

Rosy turned in his saddle and looked back again at the country. It was a rancher's dream, he thought, as he pictured these vast grasslands permanently watered by a full creek.

"You can't help but have a ranch here," he said.

"But no cattle,"

Dave said. "I've got an idea. After I see the banker today I'll spill it to you. If it works, we'll have the range stocked in two years."

Through the notch, a level stretch perhaps a half mile in width, they reined up on the rock rim and looked down into the valley stretching below them. It was a deep valley, perhaps a thousand feet below the rock rim, a dry ribbon of wash marking the bottom. The side of the valley they were on, formed by the slope of Old Cartridge and Coahuila Butte, was craggy and rough, rocky hogsbacks criss-crossing into a maze of black canyons; sudden outcrops of wind-eroded and, where there was a pocket of soil, wind-gnarled piñons clung tenaciously.

The other side of the valley was a marked contrast. It was heavily wooded, the contours of these lower mountains smoothed into gently flowing lines by centuries of rain on the soil.

They looked at the scene in silence.

"You mean you got a trail down this slope?" Rosy asked, doubt in his voice.

"Sort of," Dave said. He pointed over to the base of Old Cartridge. "There's the lake, up there close to the rock rim. Over the rock rim just below it is a wash cut deep in the rock. We can follow that wash down to the valley floor. I reckon a goat couldn't make it without that."

Ten minutes of perilous descent and they were on the pebbly floor of the wash, which twisted and writhed down the mountainside, angling imperceptibly off to the south between high walls.

An hour's ride brought them almost to the valley floor. Dave was ahead and

as he rounded a sharp bend in the steep-walled arroyo, an exclamation escaped him and he reined up to wait for Rosy who was leading the horse with the corpse. Before him, the arroyo widened out like the mouth of a funnel, and square in its middle was a cluster of board buildings, tin-roofed, unpainted.

Rosy pulled up beside him and whistled in exclamation. "That jasper don't mind sittin' on dynamite, does he? He the one Mary told about?"

"Yeah. Hammond," Dave said. "The gent that thinks he owns the D Bar T lake." He looked the place over carefully, then pointed. "See how he's run ditches around the buildings, blasted 'em out of the rock? If it wasn't for



them, he'd be buildin' new shacks after every shower. This wash goes hell-for-leather in a rain."

As they circled the buildings and picked up the road leading from them, they heard the hum of activity in the place. Across the front of the main building was painted in uncertain black letters: "Draw Three."

"He must have won that outfit in a poker game," Dave said.

Rosy looked at the buildings, at their precarious position in the middle of the very mouth of the arroyo down which tons of water would hurtle in a rain. He shook his head.

"He likely lost that land and had to take the mine," he said dryly. He looked at Dave. "You stoppin'?"

"Later," Dave said.

The mine road now as they swung into it out of the wash was rutted deep from ore wagons and followed the bank of the wide, dry stream bed heading for Single Shot and the railroad three miles away.

Rosy looked at Dave uncertainly, wondering what his plan was. As they came in sight of Single Shot he felt he had to speak.

"All right, Big Augur. How you goin' to talk to the sheriff without ropin' and hog-tyin' him? I got sort of a hunch he ain't goin' to be glad to see us."

"Ride in and see 'im," Dave said quietly. "Might's well get it over with. I'm goin' into Single Shot from now on, whenever I take the notion. If he aims to keep me out, he won't have to cut trail to find me. If he's just runnin' a sandy, then it'll do him good.

"One thing sure," Rosy said, "He'd be a damn sight proddier if we didn't bring this bushwhacker in to him."



THE streets of the town were filled with the early morning hustle of a mining town. Buckboards at the hitchracks almost outnumbered the saddle-horses. No

one paid any attention to the two horsemen leading a loaded black as they threaded their way down the street to the main corner.

The Free Throw saloon on the main corner a block up from the station was doing a booming business in its two-story frame building, the front of which, on the main street, contained the bar and gambling tables. The back half contained the dance-hall, and a tinny refrain was issuing from it at this early hour.

The other three corners contained the bank, a tight one-story affair of brick across the street from the Free Throw; a hardware store which was also the post-office; and another saloon, the Mile High.

Behind the bank lay the single adobe building that housed the office of the sheriff. The courthouse, where the officers should have been, lay up the street.

Dave and Rosy turned by the bank and half-way down its length so as to be well out of view of a glance from the sheriff's window, they turned in to the hitchrack. They left the body of the bushwhacker on his horse and covered the fifty steps to the sheriff's office, wondering if he had seen them.

Dave knocked firmly, paused for the sound of a voice and hearing it, entered. In the far corner, his back trustingly to the door, sat the sheriff, laboring at something in the depths of his roll-top desk. He did not even turn.

"Take a chair," he said, over his shoulder.

Rosy closed the door and took the chair nearest the sheriff. Dave stood in the middle of the floor, his thumbs hooked negligently in his belt. His dark face was still, his black eyes wary. His Colt swung loosely at his hips. Rosy looked around the room swiftly. A deal table, a gun-rack, some fly-specked reward posters on the smeared white-washed wall was all there was to see.

"Got a package for you, Hank," Dave said.

At the sound of the voice, the sheriff swiveled his chair, his little eyes sweeping the room, noting the positions of the two men before him, then settling blankly on Dave's face. His gaze stayed there a long time.

"Have you ever been to zoo?" he asked Dave mildly.

Dave's forehead wrinkled a little. "No."

"I thought so," the sheriff said slowly. "They got signs around the cages sayin' 'Please don't poke the animals with umbrellas'." He paused, his eyes never leaving Dave's face. "No, that ain't right. It don't say please at all. It says: 'It is forbidden'."

"Well?" Dave asked.

"If you ain't got holes in your head, you'll take a tip," the sheriff said meaningly. "When I say stay out of this town, I mean it."

Rosy hadn't seen him move since he turned, yet his hands were resting placidly, close to his guns, which were both clear of the chair arms.

"I say I got a package for you out there," Dave said calmly, ignoring the sheriff's remarks.

"I'm talkin' to you," the sheriff said flatly, his monotone rising a pitch higher and a shade thicker. "You're not talkin' to me."

Dave face was dark. "I heard you. I'm still tellin' you I—"

Rosy saw it first. Maybe it was the flicker of the red-rimmed eyes or the throbbing of the large vein in the sheriff's temple. Rosy leaped out of his chair, throwing his body across the fat belly of the sheriff, pinning his hands down tight against his gun butts.

"You big tub of guts," Rosy said savagely, "I oughta bend a gun barrel over your thick skull. We ain't makin' fight talk and we ain't takin' any either. There's a dead man out there on a horse. Pull your thinkin' pants on and talk sense."

The sheriff was breathing heavily. "Lemme up."

"Get his guns, Dave," Rosy said. Dave slipped the guns out from beneath the fat and pudgy hands and laid them on the desk.

Rosy stood up cautiously, a shadow of a grin on his face. "If you're goin' to say it ain't wise to talk sass to a sheriff, you can save your breath."

(To be continued)

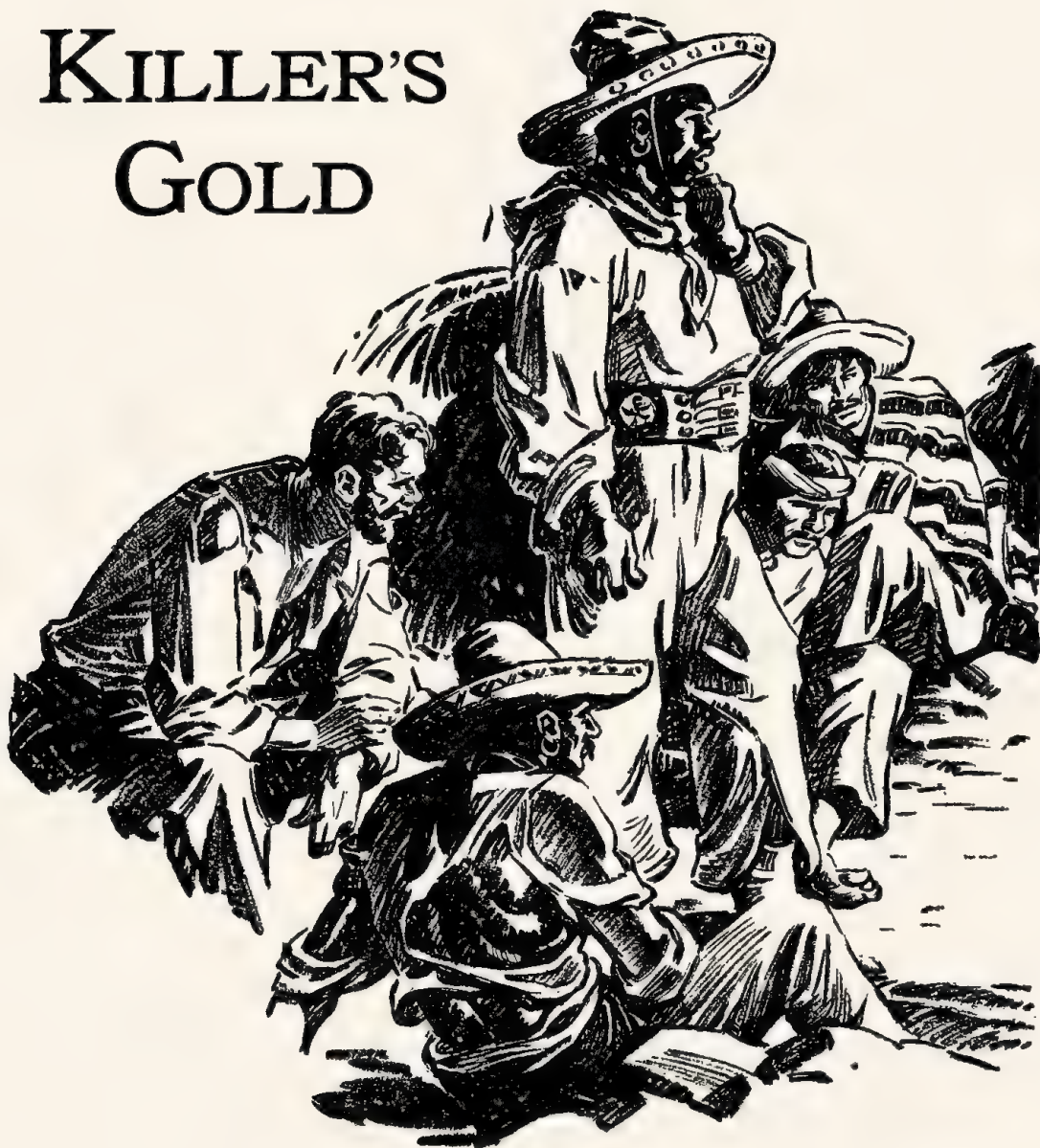
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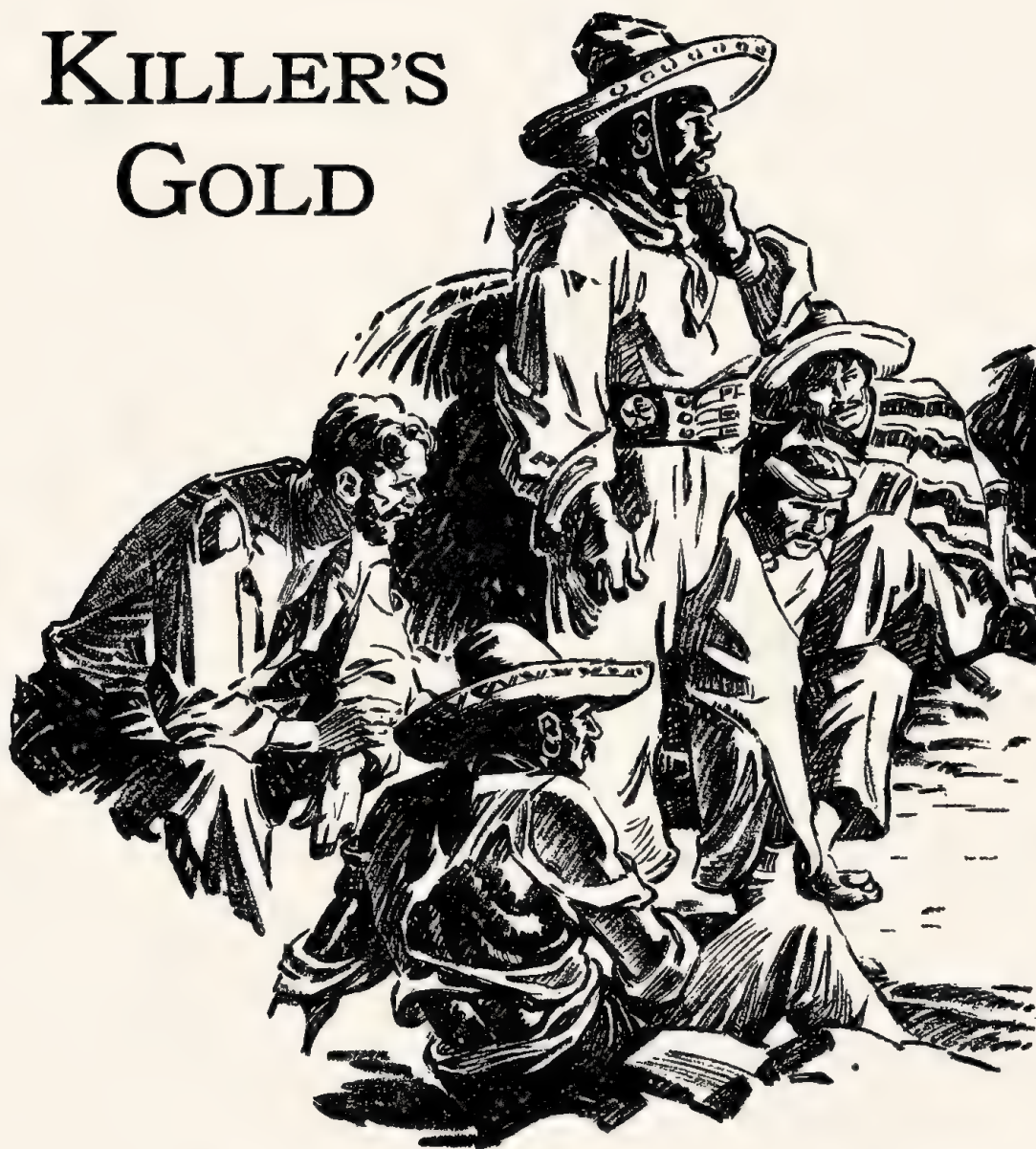
CHAPTER I

OUT OF THE DARK

RED amid the gloom of tropic night, the camp-fire burned atop the steep shore of the dark river. Close beside it huddled several swarthy men, muttering. Farther away, yet near, another man lounged in a hammock, coldly watching them. Around all brooded heavy stillness, broken only by some far cry in the forest or the faint splash of a leaping fish.

Down below, moored snug against the clay bank, floated a ponderous *piragua*, blunt-bowed, broad-beamed, deep-laden: the mastless, sailless burden bearer of the Alto Orinoco, where faint and fitful winds force men to propel their craft by pole or sweep. Beyond, the river flowed blank black, mocking with its emptiness the peering eyes of high stars and the lackluster gaze of the slouching men. Nowhere in sight, nor within a hundred miles beyond sight, burned any other light made by human hands. In all

KILLER'S GOLD



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A Novelette by
Arthur O. Friel

these long reaches of the jungle-born stream lived only wild beasts and savages.

Steadily burned the reddish blaze, defense against stealthily prowling *tigre* or silent-winged vampire. And dully mumbled the low voices; tired voices with an undernote of sullen animosity toward life in general. The brown faces, the slumped shoulders, the poorly clad torsos were as heavy as their growling tones—except those of one man. He, slightly apart from the others, squatted silent, inatten-

tive, staring broodingly into the fire as if his mind dwelt far away. His face, though darkened by much sun, was lighter, longer, leaner than the others, and half masked by scraggy black beard. A white man—among semi-Indians. Yet a white man, even more ragged, more fatigued, more somber than they. And on him, more than on his grumbling fellow-laborers, rested most often the chill gaze of the loungee in the hammock.

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dolent watcher was lowest of all by birth and blood, yet their master. He owned the *piragua* and its load of *balata* rubber; they owned not even their souls—unless perhaps the wordless white man still secretly possessed his. If so, the blackish boss hardly suspected it; for in his recurrent gaze at the silent one there glimmered a gloating look of mingled contempt and self-satisfaction. Jungle spawn, yet lord over all he surveyed, he enjoyed to the full his unquestioned power; power backed if necessary by revolver and dagger now sheathed at his broad Venezuelan waist-belt.

At length, with an animal-like yawn, the boss arose, stretched, sauntered to the shore edge to give his boat one final survey before turning in for the night. At his movement the talkers grew still. Then all straightened up, heads turning toward the outer dark. From upstream came a new, strange sound.

Something bumped. Somewhere wood smote wood. Low, slow, irregular, the dull thumps sounded again and again, coming gradually nearer. With one accord the listeners crowded to the brink to stand squinting upstream. One grunted: "Somebody paddles."

None answered. All had recognized the familiar noise of paddle-shaft against thick dugout gunwale. And, interpreting that intermittent beat, all comprehended that the paddler was alone; alone and very tired.

Long minutes passed without a hail from the oncomer. Jacobo, the black boss, scowled, right hand loosening his belt-gun. Some ignorant Indian, the unseen voyager must be, to omit the customary shout of reassurance on approach in darkness. Yet somehow the paddling did not sound Indian; it was awkward. A trick? Jacobo had many enemies, and—

Softly he sidled behind his men, shielding himself with their grouped bodies, yet maintaining a viewpoint between their heads. Then, as the paddle-beats

quickened in final effort, he again grew bold. Into the sheen of firelight slid a long, dark *curial*, and from it looked up a single face; a face, wan, weary, amazingly white.

From that haggard visage broke a rusty croak. The paddle, dropping inboard, clattered on the bottom. A hand reached for the smooth side of the *piragua*, failed to connect. The heavy canoe slid sluggishly on, rammed its blunt nose obliquely into the clay bank, stopped short. The lone paddler pitched forward and lay on his face, limp.



FOR a moment nobody moved. The brown peons stood agape. The black master scowled down into the hesitant craft, noting its emptiness of everything but the prone stranger. The current swung the outer end of the hollowed log and began drawing it away. Then came tardy activity.

From the bank sprang the silent white laborer. At the same moment Jacobo yelled:

"Grab that *curial*, *bogas*! It is a good one. Hold it!"

The oarsmen jumped, grabbed, held it. With grunts and shoves they hauled it up along shore, wedged it firmly between the *piragua* prow and the earthy shore. Meanwhile the white man who first had moved knelt amidships, giving no aid to his mud-faced mates. Instead he splashed water on the head of the unconscious paddler.

As the *curial* bumped into its impromptu berth the senseless stranger moved. His head lifted, turned, stared sidewise; his body rolled halfway over, stopped; his eyes fixed on the bearded visage above him. From his half-open mouth came a quick, shallow breath of mental relief.

"H'lo!" he croaked. "Got anything—to eat?"

The bearded mouth remained shut. The dark eyes under the unkempt hair glinted sardonically. With deliberate

survey they scanned the hollow cheeks, the thinned lips, the bristly jaw, the corded neck and the protruding ribs half revealed by the open khaki shirt. Then his own lank face quirked in a sarcastic smile.

"Eat?" he derided. "Fat chance! Unless you—"

He stopped short, teeth snapping together, eyes darting sidewise. A heavy black hand had gripped his shoulder, yanking him back. Jacobo was swagging aboard, growling:

"I will do the talking! *Quién es hombre?* Who are you?"

For a moment the stranger made no reply. Lids narrowing, lips tightening, jaw hardening, he surveyed the arrogant black with retaliative hostility. Abruptly he sat up, glancing around, scanning the heavy-faced peons, grasping the entire situation with swift comprehension. When he spoke, his answer was coldly civil, voiced in precise Spanish far better than the mongrel back-bush dialect of his interrogator.

"I am a hungry man, *señor*. Recently of the Pierce Expedition to the Orinoco headwaters. Now the only survivor. I will—"

"*Cómo?*" cut in Jacobo. "*Los otros—the others—you say—*"

"*Muertos*. Dead. The Guaharibo savages—"

The stranger paused, a perceptible shiver running down his back. From the brown men sounded a grunt of complete understanding and momentary sympathy. Jacobo himself involuntarily nodded. Then his gaze narrowed and his thick lips reopened. Before he could speak the other interposed:

"I can talk better when I have eaten. I have had no food for three days."

The black stood unmoved, eyeing him callously. Presently he said:

"Food does not hang on bushes here, *hombre*. But if you have money—"

He paused. The starving man stared, at first incredulous, then with sick anger.

"Good God!" he muttered. "Do such swine exist?"

Wearily then he turned about and fumbled for his paddle. It was not there. One of the brown peons had taken it out and tossed it on the *piragua* deck.

"Ah! So you have no money!" jeered Jacobo, increasingly offensive. "And your tale is a lie. Member of an expedition, hah? *Ajo*, every white bush tramp tells that one! An explorer, an engineer, an oil or gold prospector for some great company, wrecked or robbed by *Indios* or *bandidos*—Pah! A liar, a thief, a bush rat hiding from police! All are alike. Well, now—"

He paused again, sneeringly surveying the haggard fugitive, then dropping his gaze to the stout *curial*. His possessive gaze showed that he considered the well-made craft to be his own by right of salvage or seizure. The stranger stiffened. Suddenly desperate, he met robbery with violence.

Clad only in brown shirt, trousers, and canvas shoes, he had seemed defenseless. But now his right hand dived into a capacious side pocket, jerked forth, froze with menacing aim. In it dully gleamed a dark police revolver.



"NOW, damn you," he rasped, "hands up! Away up! Turn around!"

The black stood paralyzed, mouth open, eyes bulging. His gun hand moved an inch toward his belt, halted, hung fixed. The brown laborers gaped, breathless. The bearded white man behind Jacobo grinned thinly, making no move.

"Up!" repeated the maddened refugee, in Spanish. "Turn! *Pronto!*"

The hands went up. The burly body turned. With one stride the captor seized his prisoner's weapons. Backing away, he added:

"*Ahora*, unbuckle your belt and hand it back!"

Again Jacobo obeyed. The other

quickly adjusted the strap around his own hips, sheathed the knife, holstered his own revolver, while he incessantly watched the unmoving men. Then, breaking the captured firearm, he dropped his gaze a second to the brass heads of the ready cartridges. As he snapped the cylinder home he showed his teeth in a crooked smile.

"Now, damn you," he repeated, "I'll eat!"

Nobody moved. His hollow eyes swept the group anew, fixing on the bearded fellow beyond Jacobo.

"You there! What's to eat here?" he demanded.

"For us," drawled the bearded man, "cassava and water, as tasty as sawdust. For the boss, *sancocho*—stew—rich and juicy; also broiled turkey, roast plantain, *lechosa* melon, and coffee on the side. That's what he had tonight anyway, and there's plenty left."

The famished man's breath sucked hungrily between his teeth.

"Where?" he demanded.

"Topside." The other's head moved toward the bank where burned the fire.

"Bring it down!"

"Just like that?" The hairy grin again grew sarcastic. "This blackbird's my boss. Get his O. K. first, fellow."

"Humph! All right, I'll do that!"

Harsh, incisive Spanish told Jacobo and his servitors the new master's intentions. To which the black, carefully lowering his arms, responded:

Sí, señor—con mucho gusto! You are, I see, a man of force, not a beggarly *vagabundo*. And such I respect. With my own hands I will bring the food, *señor*. Wait but a moment."

Obsequiously smirking, he stepped overside, gesturing to the dumb peons to climb ahead of him. For a second the stranger eyed him suspiciously; then ordered:

"Not so fast! You're just too good. I'll come with you."

The other, halfway up the bank,

slowed unwillingly, swallowing an exclamation suggestive of an oath. With an injured air he declared:

"You are much too careful, *señor!* Have you not my weapons? How could I—"

"*Vaya!* Get on!"

Resignedly Jacobo resumed his climb, not too rapidly. After him the weary newcomer mounted slowly but surely, pausing, panting, but losing neither balance nor vigilance. A couple of yards away the other white man ascended languidly; and as he moved he half hummed, half sang what at first seemed a nonsensical little ditty:

"*Toodle, doodle, deedle doodle dah,
Di do dum, now watch yourself,
fella!*

*He's got a rifle there against a tree,
Beside his hammock, doodle deedle
dee!*"

The stranger's gaze swerved toward the singer, then fixed more bleakly on Jacobo. With no more words all hands went over the top.

CHAPTER II

HOLD-UP



BRISKLY Jacobo swung toward his hammock, near which a sizable stew-pot bulked black in the fire-glow.

But again came curt warning:

"Not so fast. *Alto ahí!* Stop there!"

"*Cómo?* But, *señor*, I—"

"Oh, shut up! Stand still! You *hombres* too!"

Gritting his teeth, the bushman stood quiet. The stranger strode to the kettle, looked within, nodded, set it at the edge of the fire. With an imperative gesture he motioned all beholders to squat where he could watch them. Except Jacobo, all acquiesced willingly enough, taking easy positions, watching with interest. In the heavy brown visages of the peons faintly showed covert amusement at the discom-

figure of their arrogant ruler, who stood scowling and at length lowered himself also with a sour grunt.

Thereupon the refugee swung a searching look around him, sizing up the camp with natural deliberation. Only the one hammock hung there; the laborers evidently were expected to sleep on the hard deck down below. From a close tree-branch dangled a covered basket



wherein the Northerner found the remnants of Jacobo's supper—and, by an evident effort of will, left them untasted. Then, as if by accident, he seemed belatedly to discover the rifle standing against that same tree.

"Oho!" said he, grasping the weapon and eyeing its owner. "You forgot that this was here, no doubt!"

"*Por Dios*, I did so!" exclaimed Jacobo. "There was a *león*—a puma—here when we approached, and I brought up that gun to use if he should return. I did not intend—"

"Uh-huh," the other cut him off. Coolly he levered out the cartridges—the usual thick .44's of the bush—pocketed them, and dropped the empty piece beside the hammock. With a derisive grin

he then sat in that wide-meshed net and surveyed the whole gang. All but Jacobo now were wooden-faced. Jacobo glowered.

Time dragged. While the stew grew warm the watchers sized up their uninvited guest anew, reading more clearly the ravages of hardship, estimating the natural strength beneath the face and frame emaciated by hunger and long labor. He was young, tall, well-muscled, evidently vigorous when well nourished; blue-eyed, brownish blond of hair and unshaven cheek and chin; firm-jawed, wide-mouthed, and apparently, under normal conditions, straightforward and good-humored—but an unforgiving enemy if wronged. Now his inimical gaze at Jacobo betokened consideration of retaliative measures as yet undetermined. The black grew increasingly uneasy.

At length, dragging back the pot, the patient waiter sank on one knee and scooped up a handful of its warm contents; crammed his mouth, chewed hastily, swallowed, grabbed for more. But suddenly he halted, holding himself rigid with restraint; gazed, tight-mouthed, at the rich wet mass in his palm, and then dropped it back. The next upward sweep brought no chunks but broth; and after several more hand-cups of this he started up and away from the tempting solids. Ravenous appetite, demanding a greedy gorge after so long a fast, was conquered by realization of its painful penalty.

"No more now!" he muttered through set teeth. Across the fire the bearded fellow smiled approval.



FOR a moment the stranger stood quiet, breathing deep, seeming already to grow stronger as his famished stomach swiftly absorbed new life from the meager meal. Then, wiping his greasy hand on a trouser-leg, he sauntered to the hammock, where he again sat resting. Presently he again opened Jacobo's revolver and from it extracted one car-

tridge, which he inspected closely. As he reinserted it a queer, short chuckle sounded in his throat.

Now, running his gaze again over the motionless audience, he addressed the attentive man with the beard.

"I could use a cigarette if I had one. How are you fixed?"

"O. K.," drawled the other. "Got the makings."

"Roll me one, will you? Or do you have to ask the boss first?"

"Not this time. My tobacco's my own."

Wherewith the speaker produced a small sack of black Brazilian tobacco and a tight roll of brown *tabarí* bark; methodically he built a cigarette, and rising, strolled forward. As he moved, Jacobo muttered something. To which the other, picking up a small stick from the fire, coolly dissented:

"No, *señor*. I am not paid to fight."

The man in the hammock, taking the hint, swung his gun to cover the advancing shape and took the cigarette with his left hand. The donor winked down at him, held the burning stick until the tobacco was ignited, then retreated a few steps.

"Any other little thing you'd like?" he queried.

"Yes. Squat there and talk a bit. Who—"

The smoker broke off, coughing. The other grinned.

"Go easy," he counseled. "That stuff's strong. Well?"

"Phew! I'll say it's strong! Well, what outfit is this, anyway? And who are you—if that's a fair question?"

The shaggy black head wagged reprovingly.

"That's always a delicate question in Amazonas, fellow. But my name's Doe, John Doe." A cynical quirk belied the name. "And this dark-complexioned gent is Jacobo Dominguez, rubber dealer, from the Rio Casiquiare, and a hard egg, mister. The rest of us are just

animals, as you see. On our way to San Fernando with cargo. That's my story and I stick to it. What's yours?"

Slow-motioned, he began constructing a cigarette of his own. The other, after a cautious puff at the powerful smoke he held, countered:

"You haven't heard of the Pierce Expedition?"

"Nope. We're boobs from away back. The Brazilian border, to be exact."

"I see. And you entered the Orinoco about—"

"Two days ago."

"I see. We went up a month ago. Object, to explore the headwaters. It's never been thoroughly done, you know. Six of us, with two dugouts, native crews—"

"From where?"

"The crews? Away down river. Picked men. Good men—as boatmen."

"Nobody from San Fernando, the last town up this way?"

"No. We thought of taking on a guide there, but we didn't like the looks of anybody we saw. And our men said they were all a bad lot, from the governor down."

"And that's not the half of it. It's a nest of snakes. Well, then what?"

"Well—up beyond the Raudal Guaharibo the savages jumped us. Caught us foul, making camp. No chance to fight. Arrows from nowhere, all around, all at once, and then a howling rush. Slaughter. Murder!"

The narrator's teeth clicked shut; his head jerked abruptly as if to dislodge a horrid memory. He drew hard on the cigarette, blinked, swayed, flung down the rank narcotic. Doe, inhaling his own smoke, said nothing. His gaze dwelt inscrutably on the sole survivor of the massacre—the survivor who, although presumably surrounded, surprised, caught amid many arrows and rushed by a ferocious horde, sat here unwounded and armed. As that man

steadied and met the saturnine brown watch he flushed angrily.

"I," he added, "was fishing, downstream, alone on the bank. Why they didn't spot me I don't know. I saw it all but couldn't get there. It was all over in no time. So—well, what would *you* do, with only a pocket gun?"

Doe's gaze held unwavering, plumbing the drawn face. Then he nodded, shrugged a shoulder, replied:

"Me? I'd run like hell at the first war-whoop. I'm no hero. But how'd you get the canoe?"

fires, and therefore ate their meat raw.

"And you made the return trip to here in three days?" he reminded. "Some current, that!"

"Hell, no! It's been—I don't know how long. But it's been three days since I ate anything. I wonder—"

He eyed the stewpot wistfully, but held himself away from it. Then, detecting a restive movement by Jacobo, he scowled and lifted the revolver-muzzle an inch. The black subsided.

"Tough," commented Doe. "And



"Believe it or not, they sent it to me. The Guaharibos don't use canoes. They travel on their legs, like the wild beasts they are. They get across streams by making flimsy footbridges. We saw several old ones—but never a man or a track, until they struck. After the massacre they threw most of our stuff into the river and shoved the canoes out to drift. I swam under water to one and floated along beside it until dark. Then I got aboard and paddled."



DOE nodded again, as if this explanation coincided with known facts concerning the primitive aborigines of the headwaters—creatures said to be so ignorant that they could not even make

more to come, maybe. By the way, could a man ask your name?"

"Pierce."

The dark brows lifted.

"Oh. Mr. Pierce himself, in person, of the Pierce Expe—"

"Wrong," interrupted the blond. "That was my uncle. I'm just a poor relation, ranking as geologist on this trip. Geologist! Ha!"

He laughed shortly, as if deriding himself; then frowned as if troubled. Doe watching, dribbled out another mouthful of smoke. Presently he suggested:

"Geologizing's not your real line, then?"

"As much as anything is." Pierce's tone sounded morose. "I know geology well enough, but—"

"But it's not so good a racket just now, up home?"

"Rotten! Like everything else. No jobs."

"M-hm. Same old story."

A silence ensued. Pierce brooded, apparently contemplating his future with misgivings. Then he studied Doe with unspoken speculation. At length he queried:

"Want to throw in with me, Doe?"

"As how?"

"Help me down the river."

"To where?"

"Ciudad Bolivar; steamship port."

"How?"

"Swing a paddle in my canoe."

"For what?"

"Well, for as much as you're getting here, anyway."

"Sure about that?"

Pierce eyed the ragged clothing, underfed body, sunburned bare feet, and, again, the gaunt face.

"You couldn't get much less," he giped. "Sawdust and water, you said? Well—"

"Well, that's something. What have you got?"

The blond frown deepened.

"Money in bank at Bolivar?" pressed Doe. "If so, that's near a thousand miles from here, and they're damn' long miles. And have you?"

"Not a dollar."

"Uh-huh. Then who'll pay me off?"

Another silence. Pierce's expression grew more sober, betraying gloomy forebodings of his status on reaching the far Orinoco town where money would be doubly necessary. The other, reading his look, dryly declined:

"No thanks, Mister Explorer. I've starved before now, and I don't like it. This job isn't much, but it's all I've got and I'll stick. And before you see Bolivar you'll know what being broke really is.

Try to get a lift from any official—yes, just try it! Try to get a hand-out from anybody at all! Boy, you haven't seen anything yet! If you'll take my tip, you'll do just what I'm doing now—play tame dog to this blackbird and work your way down on *piraguas*. He'll kick you around a lot, especially till he's worked off his grouch at you for sticking him up; but you'll live."

"What? Bootlick this swine? I'll starve first!"

"O. K., fellow. Just as you like. I might give you a hand, at that, if I wanted to go down river. But I don't. This section suits me for the present, anyway."

"Oh, I see. You have your reasons, of course. Well, I'll be going."



HE arose, regarding Jacobo again with mouth hardening. Various expressions flared on and faded on his taut visage. Swiftly stooping, he grasped the empty rifle, slid it possessively under an arm, then stepped forward.

"Mira, Dominguez!" he rasped. "You took my boat. Suppose I now take yours."

Jacobo started up, dismayed.

"Cómo? My *piragua*?" he sputtered. "You—Cra, you cannot do that!"

"Cómo no? Why not? Boat for boat. Fair exchange."

"Ajol You—you joke, *señor*. That worthless curial for my—Ha ha! Si, you joke! And I, *señor*, was but having my little joke when I seemed to refuse you food at first—to see what manner of man you might be, *comprende*?"

"Oh, yes? A joke very sour, that!"

"Perhaps, *señor*, perhaps. But now I make amends. You shall travel as my guest, in comfort the most elegant, I promise you—"

"Until I sleep and give you a chance to knock me in the head. Hardly! Dominguez, I would take your boat as you

tried to take mine—or at least cut it adrift and let it go to wreck on the rocks—but that would make these men of yours suffer also. You can thank them, and this man in particular—” he nodded sidewise toward Doe “—that I leave it to you. I shall take only this food, and your weapons, and some cartridges. And for those perhaps I shall pay you—*mañana*, or some other day.”

Jacobo licked his thick lips, narrowly probing the Northerner's expression. Doe, also eyeing Pierce askance, quietly quizzed:

“You don't really mean that, do you? About the weapons, I mean.”

“I sure do!” came reckless retort. “I may need them, and—”

“So do we,” interposed the questioner. “A gun's mighty necessary to us. There are hijackers down here as well as up home. And it feeds us, too. When he shoots more than he can eat we get the leavings. So don't take the rifle, fellow.”

For a moment Pierce's mouth was obdurate. But then he grumbled:

“Oh well, all right.”

“And if you want to stay in the clear you'll leave his other hardware too. This fellow's got considerable drag with some officials down the line, and there *are* some laws in this country; if you happened to get delayed somewhere and he caught up with you— well, you've no friends and, worse yet, no money. Taking grub and cartridges won't count. But a man's weapons— that wouldn't look good, fellow. Especially when your whole story about the massacre sounds fishy.”

“How does it?” snapped the refugee.

“Oh, a lot of queer things happen back here in the bush, and folks are suspicious of lone survivors. You might get held for investigation, and the local jails are damn' lousy. I'd keep out in the open if I were you. It's healthier.”

“Humph! Well—”

Jaws tight, Pierce scowlingly considered. Jacobo, perceiving that his man

was counseling moderation, sensibly kept quiet.

“I'll see,” concluded Pierce. “Meanwhile I want grub and revolver cartridges, and no more objections!”

“Is your gun the same caliber as his?”

“Exactly.”

The peculiar smile again flitted over Pierce's lips. Doe said:

“That's luck. I'll handle him.”

Lazily he addressed his boss in bush vernacular almost unintelligible to the blond. Jacobo started an evident effort at evasion, fell silent at a few more words from his man. Sourly he moved toward the *piragua*. At once Pierce followed. Doe grasped stew-pot and food-basket and walked after him. The peons gave both white men wide room, grouping away from the fire.

Jacobo, boarding his boat, ducked into its low palm-branch *carroza*, or cabin. Doe, entering the canoe, deposited the food, then vaulted to the larger craft and tossed down the paddle. From the *carroza* came a thick bundle of cassava cakes shoved forth by Jacobo, who then handed forth something smaller. Doe dropped all with solid thuds into the canoe bottom, then sprang down and tugged the dugout loose.

“All set,” he prompted. “Luck to you!”



WHILE Jacobo, empty-handed, glowered down from the deck, Pierce got aboard. A box of revolver cartridges lay there; this he pushed carefully under a seat. Then for a moment he was mysteriously busy with Jacobo's revolver and his own. Straightening, he tossed the rifle and the black man's weapon-belt, with its sidearm and dagger in place, out on the wet clay.

“As per your order of even date,” he told Doe. “And when I'm gone hand your boss this.”

His closed hand met the other's hard palm and dropped something into it.

While the bearded man stared at the gift the canoe slid out and away. Into the opaque dark it surged and disappeared with a rapid thumping of shaft on gunwale, heading downstream. Abruptly the noise ceased. Steered silently, the craft curved away from its visible course and swam unseen on a long, slow, but steady tack toward the strong mid-river current. Its paddler, watching backward, chuckled as he witnessed the ensuing excitement.

Jacobo, revolver in hand, was vainly attempting to shoot it after the vanished canoe. Dropping the unloaded weapon, he snatched up the equally empty rifle and brandished it like a madman, yelling furiously into the darkness; then, diving into his *carroza*, emerged immediately and struggled to ram new bullets into the long gun. His frenzied shouts continued and his burly shape fairly danced in uncontrollable rage. Gun loaded, he opened wild, vindictive fire.

Bullets hummed through air, sizzled along water, smacked against some protruding river-boulder, all far wide of the cannily deflected target. Magazine empty, the rifle was flung down, and the foaming black lunged at Doe, striving to kick and pummel him as the nearest scapegoat. The bearded man adroitly ducked, sprang ashore, nimbly ascended the slope, stood out of reach at the top. And to the invisible canoeeman downstream he sent a chuckling shout of his own:

"Hey, Pierce! Damned if I don't like your nerve? Wait at San Fernando! Got something to tell you—maybe!"

Then he dodged again as Jacobo threw something at him. And Pierce, without reply, stroked quietly away, shaking with recurrent mirth. His mysterious parting gift, momentarily inexplicable, now had proven most eloquent, moving the minds of men to amazed or angered appreciation of the blond stranger's character.

Six brass shells—empty. Six shells extracted from the refugee's revolver when,

at the last moment, he reloaded it with live cartridges from the black man's side-arm. Six shells which, mutely contradicting his unassuming story of immediate flight from swarming savages, testified that for his massacred comrades he had taken vengeful toll. Six shells which, slyly told about by snickering peons, would blast the tough reputation of their master all along the Alto Orinoco. So long as he might live, so long would endure the guffawing tale that hard Jacobo Dominguez, jungle bully, rapacious brute, treacherous killer of more than one man, had been backed down, disarmed, forced to bargain for possession of his own *piragua* by a tenderfoot with an empty gun.

CHAPTER III

ALONE



STARS bright overhead, smooth dark water around, black walls of riverside forest looming vaguely afar at either side, the lone dugout cruised on through the night.

Its paddler's strokes had grown slow and fitful, with frequent pauses to rest or steer while the powerful current bore him ever on. At long intervals he stooped a moment to the stew-pot, scooped a small palmful of food, and deliberately chewed for some time before swallowing; then, jaws tight, forced himself to fix all attention again on the river. Thus resolutely rationing himself, he gave his gnawing stomach partial satisfaction, yet not too much. Even so, before long he found himself assailed both by cramps and by unconquerable fatigue.

Wherefore, angling his clumsy craft gradually to the nearer shore, he sought a haven. Presently his dilated pupils discerned in the faint starshine a small bay which, when entered, disclosed at one side a tight cove amid dense brush.

There, with a perfunctory hitch of bow-rope around a sapling, he slumped down with head and hands hanging, almost too exhausted to make another motion. And when he had eaten a little more and drunk some river water he lay back, with head pillowed on his commandeered packet of cassava, and straightway fell dead asleep.

The stars marched on, a straggly host at times smeared out by broad dark clouds, yet ever reappearing in haphazard array, twinkling away westward. The broad river slid ceaselessly past, a colossal wet serpent emitting occasional gruesome hissings, gurglings, suckings, splashings, then resuming silence. The matted density of trees and vines gave forth weird calls, stealthy footsteps, sudden scuffles, small screams, glum mutters. Winds swept over, blanketing all other sounds with the rushing clamor of leaves, then dying out. Somewhere far off grumbled thunder. To none of these, nor to the penetrating chill of dank exhalations from water and earth, did the supine sleeper in the hollowed log give conscious heed. Save for unfelt changes of position and unrealized mumbles, he lay as if lifeless until aroused by the racket of beasts and birds announcing sunrise.

Pallid, blue-lipped, shivering, he then sluggishly sat up. His face contracted; a hand swollen by strenuous paddling rose to his head, through which had lunged a streak of pain. Abruptly his stomach heaved, and he lay back, sick.

After a time he sat up again, moving gradually, balancing his head with care. A dull twinge, warning but not punishing, rewarded his caution. And soon, using the same judgment, he was able to eat. Although fiercely hungry, he could neither touch nor even look at the cold, greasy mess in the kettle. Instead he devoured half the *lechosa* melon, which, golden ripe, was delicious; then gnawed at the broiled *pauji* turkey, tough but still untainted. When some inner moni-

tor advised cessation he stopped, drank, and again relaxed. At once he felt unutterably weary.

"Caught cold," he grumbled. "Come on, you! Up and at 'em! You can't loaf here."

But he lay still. That same subconscious guardian within him retorted:

"Can't, eh? You'd better, big boy! You'll stay right here and like it, until you're fit to travel! A cold? Maybe you have, and no wonder. You're lucky that you're not raving with fever! And if you pull out of here before I say so, you will be! You've been through hell and high water, gone on your nerve just too long; now you're a complete washout. Show some sense! I'll tell you when you can go. Till then, take it easy!"

Wherewith the deadening lethargy enwrapped him in a semi-conscious doze. Soft warmth from the sun-smitten river flowed into his shady covert; a little bird sang somewhere to its mate, and pleasant fantasies of people and places far away drifted through his slumbrous mind. Physically and mentally his inner self began its work of recuperation from recent horror and hardship. And for a time he was dreamily content.



AT LENGTH, however, something recalled him to reality. A small, vague sound, slow, regular, slightly squeaky, kept floating along the water so near his head. Eyes opening, he listened; then rose on an elbow, looking around. After a moment he muttered:

"Hm! I'll bet—"

Warily standing up, he found both head and stomach complaisant. So, stepping overside, he meandered through the fringe of verdure curtaining his cove from the river.

"M-hm, that's it," he concluded. "Hullo, boys!"

The soft-spoken greeting went no farther than his lips; and his head, beside a thick *ceiba* tree, remained invis-

ble to anyone out on the water. There, in midstream, traveled Jacobo Dominguez and his crew.

Deep-laden with weighty blocks of *balata*, humpy amidships with its curved *carroza*, the *piragua* journeyed like a monstrous water-bug, its long-shanked legs rising stiffly, moving forward slowly, gripping water again with wide flat feet, swinging back with dull creaks. At the upper end of each leg a stolid man worked wearily, drearily, facing forward, pushing mechanically at his clumsy oar. Galley slaves, grinding away at monotonous labor, they looked at nothing aside, probably thought of nothing at all. Last of the three toiling on the starboard side was Doe, a mere automaton like the rest in motion, if not in mentality. Even at that distance, away out from shore, his lank shape and shaggy beard were distinguishable from the stockier bulks of his Indian co-workers. As Pierce watched, his blond brows drew down.

"A white man," he muttered. "A decent-hearted, straight-spoken white man reduced to that! And liking it! It's rotten!"

His scowl darkened as he glanced forward. There, sitting at the prow like a dark toad, Jacobo was for once enduring the hot sun like his slaves. His attitude was not that of a *proero*, seeking to spy semi-visible underwater rocks. On the contrary, his posture indicated implacable watch for something—or somebody—farther ahead; and an occasional gleam near his thick neck suggested sun-glimmer on a well-worn rifle barrel, leaning ready for use against a shoulder.

"You'd put a bullet into my back *con mucho gusto*, wouldn't you?" quietly jeered the hidden man. "And if it went a bit low and I squirmed quite a while, that'd be perfect. Not today, old skunk! Nor any other, if I see you first."

Until the sluggish freighter crept around the next bend he contemplated it with mingled feelings, his thoughts alter-

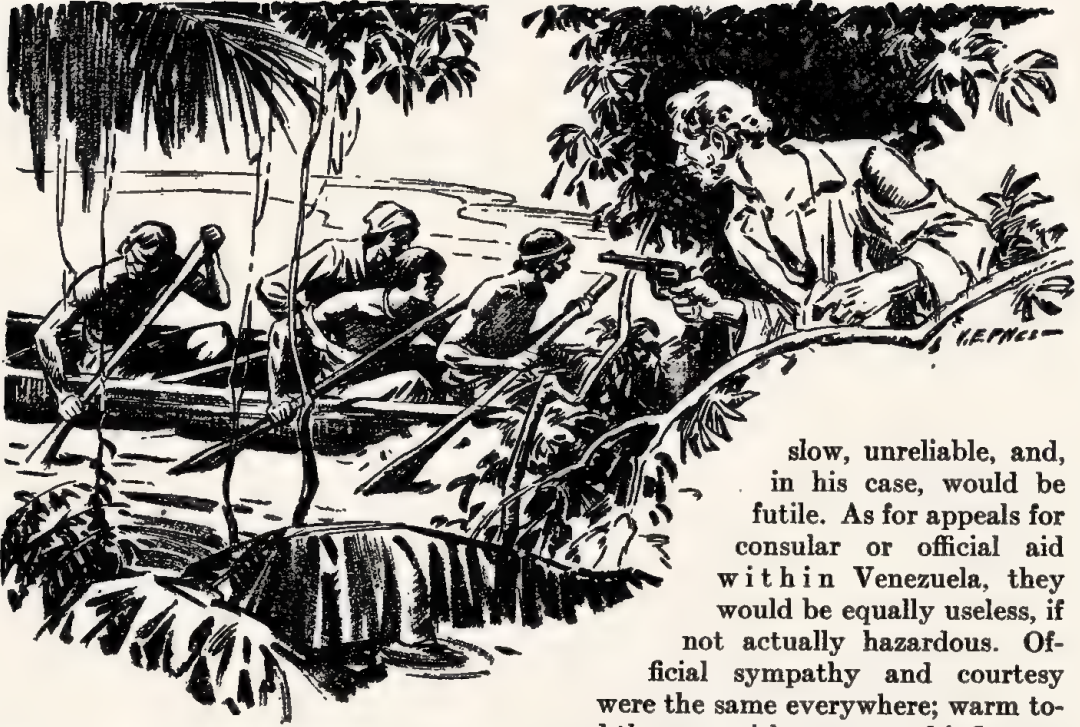
nating between Dominguez and Doe. Returning to his canoe, he ruminated:

"Just as well that I stayed here, feeling like this. If I'd cracked up out there in the sun he'd have overhauled me when I couldn't fight. Tomorrow'll be another day."

After which he ate more of the luscious *lechosa*, meanwhile realizing that his interior already felt considerably better. Unawares, he was taking excellent medicine. Ripe *lechosa* is not only very palatable but a powerful digestant; and the few crude edibles he had been able to find and devour in his desperate retreat would have sickened any but a famished man, while the ensuing actual starvation, coupled with fatigue toxins and nerve exhaustion, had practically poisoned him. Now the juicy fruit-pulp busied itself at its grateful task of smoothly righting the internal wrongs, and, so doing, made him again sleepy.

Yawning, he resigned himself to a long *siesta*. When he again awoke he felt pleurably lazy, not burdened by insupportable inertia. His head was clear, his body seemingly hollow but at ease. So, collecting dry sticks amid the near woods, he kindled a fire, hung the kettle on a pole set on convenient low bush-boughs, and awaited a real meal. While the stew warmed he took stock of his meager equipment.

Revolver, slightly rusty now, but ready for work. Cartridges, fifty, fresh in their carton; six more in the cylinder. Long clasp-knife, decidedly rusty; he cleaned its blade by shoving it repeatedly into the soil. Matches, Venezuelan, about thirty in water-tight metal case. Bandanna handkerchief, soggy from frequent wettings to cool his head. Pipe; pouch of tobacco, watersoaked; after momentary hesitation he flung these away. Shirt, belt, trousers, sneakers, remnants of socks, ripped underwear. Nothing else. No hat; he had gone bareheaded in the shaky Guaharibo forest, fled perforce without his river helmet;



made a crude contraption from wild plantain leaves, which, with his bandanna, had mitigated the brain-baking sun; now he had lost that; must make another. No money; not a *bolivar*, a *real*, a copper coin. At present this poverty did not matter. But soon. . . .



EYES narrowing, he squarely faced the fact that without money he could not leave Venezuela except as a pauperized deportee; and that he could get no money from anywhere within his knowledge. The Pierce expedition had not been backed, financially or even nominally, by any organization or individual up North. Independent, self-reliant, it had traveled at the expense of Old Man Pierce himself, a hard-mouthed, set-minded man with few friends and only moderate means. So now nobody up home would cable funds to young Pierce—if, indeed, he could manage to inform any one up there of his need. Cable messages, he knew, cost a dollar a word, cash down. Letters were

slow, unreliable, and, in his case, would be futile. As for appeals for consular or official aid within Venezuela, they would be equally useless, if not actually hazardous. Official sympathy and courtesy were the same everywhere; warm toward the man with money and influence, frozen toward the one without. Moreover, as Doe had suggested, his unkempt appearance and unsubstantiated story might land him in some local jail on suspicion, to be held indefinitely. No, he could hardly hope for a helping hand anywhere, near or far.

So what? He could hardly continue holding up Orinoco men with his gun, either. One alien against a whole river-length of native sons—quick-triggered ones at that—would not get far. So—

There he swung the stew off the fire, broke out a slab of cassava, and settled down to steady eating. The *sancocho* had grown a trifle rank, but he downed it with keen relish and eager digestion. At the finish the pot was empty and he was comfortably full. Something still was lacking, however; presently he realized that it was his pipe. For a moment he considered hunting it up in the brush and attempting to dry out the soggy tobacco in the pouch. But, with a resistant headshake, he let them lie unretrieved. Smoking used up matches; he

would need every one for more vital uses. Rising, he took the pot to the water, washed it, contemplated the empty river.

Sliding ceaselessly to the distant ocean, the great stream both lured and mocked him. It would carry him out, on its ever broadening back, if he but kept himself alive. But out to what? Even if he somehow reached the States, how could he live there? All over that depressed country, thousands of other trained men still were vainly seeking jobs. For two long years he had sought his own berth in business, landing nothing. And now bleak, bitter winter gripped all the northern region wherein he had lived. Involuntarily he shivered, there in the warm shade. And half consciously he admitted:

"Doe, maybe you're not so dumb at that. Down here a fellow out of luck doesn't have to pound icy streets, anyway. And—Hm! I wonder—"

For the first time he remembered Doe's parting shout in the dark:

"Wait at San Fernando! Got something to tell you—maybe."

With a wry smile he cogitated, presently concluding:

"Well, why not! If I get there first maybe I'll do that. And as soon as I've made a new green turban I might as well be drifting. See you later, Doe—maybe."

And, moving with languid limbs but brisk spirit, he began scouting the adjacent verdure for leaves suitable to form another shapeless *sombrero*. Vague though that promise of the white laborer had been, it was at least something to which to look forward while journeying. And soon, while the sun rolled farther and faster down into the west, the long canoe slid again into the stream and stroked steadily toward whatever waited down the line.

CHAPTER IV

BLUFF



FAR into the night the curial floated on down the winding Orinoco. Its paddler, revived by his long day-time rest and the nutritious *sancocho*, felt no desire to suspend travel at nightfall. No longer driven by dire necessity, he paddled easily, and thus had expended but little of his partly restored strength by sundown. And, unlike the higher reaches of the mountain-born stream, this broader, deeper section held no smashing *raudaes* (rapids), nor enough scattered boulders to imperil a small craft moving at moderate speed. So, with the stars again bright overhead and a waning moon due later, the great waterway offered him free passage with little strain. And, with a whole big *bulto* of cassava to munch if hungry, with refreshingly cool breezes replacing the fierce sun, and all the tranquil solitude of mysterious night soothing soul and body, he stroked or drifted in supreme content, untroubled by the possibilities of tomorrow.

Nowhere along the dusky banks glowed any fire. When at length the lopsided old moon thinly illuminated the world, he still had the river all to himself. And when, healthfully tired, he drew into another masked cove and laid him down to sleep, the Dominguez *piragua* still was somewhere ahead. Whether or not its vengeful owner had driven his men hard, the six sweeps and the push of the current on its wide stern had propelled it a goodly distance that day.

"Ho-hum!" yawned Pierce. "Have a good time, Jacobo, old skunk! My back's not ahead of you yet, but you don't know it, so dream on!"

Whereafter he slumbered soundly until long past daybreak. Then suddenly he awoke, nerves tense. Near him, very near, something was stealthily approaching. Or so it seemed. Dry leaves

crackled; were still, as if the thing paused; rustled again —

Revolver in hand, he slowly, silently lifted himself on an elbow, searching the surrounding brush. The noise came once more— His taut trigger-finger relaxed, and he almost laughed aloud. The fearsome creature was no murderous Indian, no mestizo cutthroat, but a big bird—a *pava*—scratching about for its breakfast.

An instant later his hand tightened anew, and the steel barrel froze to aim. The bird, seeing for the first time the head and shoulders above the seemingly lifeless hollowed log, stood a second paralyzed. In that second the short gun crashed out its death. The jungle fowl flopped, kicked, went limp.

"Welcome to our stew-pot!" chuckled the man, springing up and out. Forthwith he fell to work at plucking and dressing the warm body. The job was nearly finished when came new sounds, softer and more sinister.

A faint thump of wood on wood; a mutter suggesting a curse; a tiny drip of water on water, as if from a suspended paddle—these stole in from the river beyond his covert. Then spoke a low voice, rumbling something unintelligible.

Swiftly the lone man stepped behind a tree. Another voice mumbled. But nothing entered the little cove. Stealing along from tree to brush-clump and so to other concealments, Pierce worked to the outer waterside, noiseless in his light sneakers. There, unseen, he saw drifting death.

Four men, brown-faced, slit-mouthed, snake-eyed, in ragged shirts and a slovenly dugout, floated downstream with occasional dips of paddles. Above the thick gunwales jutted gray-brown gun-barrels, old, worn, but ready for quick seizure. The hard eyes under the cheap palm-strip hats were searching the shore like those of predacious beasts. And beasts the four were; outlaws, bandits, inhuman scum of the back bush, seeking whatever they might devour or destroy.

Although Pierce had never before seen them, he recognized their character at once—and remained motionless. Cruising downstream, they had heard his shot and steered over to learn its source.

Slowly they passed down along the bank and disappeared beyond projecting verdure. Warily following, Pierce sighted them again and kept them in view until, with morose agreement, they all began paddling in unison, swinging out toward the stronger current. As he walked back toward his bird he remembered Doe's declaration:

"There are hijackers down here as well as up home."

And, for Doe's sake, he was glad he had left Dominguez his weapons. Without them the whole crew would be defenseless against such river pirates as these—and dead men would tell no tales about the disappearance of that quite valuable *piragua*. And, in a way, the blood of all would be on the Northerner's hands. So thinking, he reached his temporarily abandoned *pava*—to halt with a sudden curse.

"Well, damn you!" he swore.

A snarl answered; a snarl and the threat of glaring eyes. The naked bird was gone. Remained only a bloody remnant in the clutch of a fierce cat.



STANDING its ground, claws unsheathed, reddened fangs bared, the creature faced him with the reckless menace of all its tribe when maddened by blood. Smaller than a *tigre* or *león*, it was a *tigrillo*—"little tiger"—large as a Northern wild-cat and far more dangerous. Prowling the shadows by day after an unsuccessful night hunt, no doubt, it had chanced on this providential delicacy and now savagely resented human intrusion. With a retaliatory snarl Pierce again drew his revolver.

Raging, he fired pointblank. The bullet missed. The cat, shocked by the explosion, vanished. In one swift streak it

was gone behind a tree. Claws rattled, bits of bark fell, leaves rustled high above. Cursing again, Pierce slowly pocketed his weapon, scowled at the uneatable debris which had been so fair a prize, and stalked back to his canoe to chew more dry cassava.

As he worried that starchy stuff down he paused a moment, thinking back and forward: to the savage massacre, the brutality of Jacobo, the reptilian cut-throats in their canoe, the feline raid just now on his food, the unborn probabilities down the river. Then he nodded bleakly toward the spot where the cat had stood.

"That's a lesson," he thought. "Grab whatever you can, and damn the other fellow! The spirit of the bush—and the whole world. All right. I'll remember."

To which something demurred:

"The whole world? Not quite. Where would you be now if Doe hadn't given you a hand? Suppose he hadn't tipped you off to that black sneak's rifle? Suppose he'd—"

"Oh well, what's Doe?" angrily countered his other self. "Just a gutless slave! Going to be like him?"

With which he ground his unappetizing provender again between his teeth; from that time onward he fronted the Orinoco country with fixed animosity.

Not until night did he move out. Purposely loafing, he drowsed and napped, gathering energy for long steady work under the cool moon. About sundown he succeeded in shooting a small black *mono viudita* monkey which, unwary, came sauntering along a near low branch. This meat, broiled and chewed until his jaws ached—for it was tough as rubber—put new vigor into his own muscles. Then, with gun fully reloaded from Jacobo's box, he swung away with the short, rhythmic strokes of the long-distance paddler. And this night he spent little time in idle drifting or enjoyment of the solitude.

Throughout the hours of starshine and later moonlight he cruised with never an

investigatory halt. Toward morning he spied on one shore a small reddish glow betokening a sleepy camp-fire, but he paused not at all. The *piragua*, he judged, must be farther downstream; and he had no business with Dominguez anyhow. Dawn found him tired, yet not exhausted. At sunrise he was berthed up a narrow *caño*, a quarter-mile inland from the river; under a spreading tree which deeply shadowed the slow creek he slept, as always, in his dugout.

So, for several more nights, he passed unseen, unheard, unsuspected, down the watery highway which grew ever wider. Subsisting mainly on cassava, shooting at chance-met game only when sure of his success, jealously husbanding both cartridges and matches, he remained gaunt, but retained strength. And, as he journeyed through unbroken peace by night and slumbered unmolested by day, his lean face changed. From it faded the tautness compounded of grisly memories, anxiety, and exposure to nerve-corroding sun; instead grew an expression of cool self-reliance and steady determination. Somehow he had ceased to worry about anything, looked forward only to tomorrow, and felt—illogically but persistently—that better fortune awaited him at San Fernando.

At last, at sunrise of another clear, hot day, he swung his canoe out of the greenish Orinoco current into a black flood assailing him on the port beam. No town, no semblance of human habitation was yet in sight. Only thick, somber woods rose on the steep bank; only funereal water, empty of life, pushed against the blunt prow, striving to shove him back. But this ominous river was, he knew, the Atabapo; upstream, beyond a rocky point, huddled the squalid, malarial settlement constituting the capital of the virtually lawless Territorio de Amazonas: headquarters of its rubber trade, and home of every vice and crime known to man or woman; a town which more than once had reeked with wholesale

human slaughter, and which a wrathful priest, departing in despair, had cursed with the doom of Sodom—destruction by flames. All this Pierce had heard weeks ago. Now, as he labored up along the eddying shore current, he mentally set his teeth.

At the rocky point the swirling black water hurled him back and nearly swamped his boat. From somewhere planed a black vulture, sailing low, eyeing him with cold anticipation. Catching sight of that evil creature as he drifted back, the panting man grimaced with hate. And, after scowling at the murderous water, he snorted at himself:

"Fool! You can't buck that alone! And you don't have to. Just use the ladder."

Working to shore, he tied the unwieldy craft to a projecting snag. And up among big tree-roots protruding from the precipitous bank he clambered to the top. There, finding a path, he strode through the gloomy woods toward the town.



BEFORE long the woods ended, giving way to open ground studded with haphazard tonka or fruit trees, beyond which showed dingy low clay houses grouped on a shelving shore. Pierce paused, keenly eyeing the disreputable settlement and the boat anchorage. Both looked empty.

"Hm!" he muttered, rubbing his stubbly chin. "Nobody home!"

In truth, the whole place seemed deserted. Among the houses no shape moved, no child yelled, no dog barked or cock crowed. And at the mooring place certainly lay no *piragua*. The lifelessness was unnatural. Weeks ago, when the ill-fated expedition had spent a day or two here, three or four stubby freight-boats had floated sluggishly at the crude landing; their crews had camped in flimsy palm huts along the edge; the villagers had drifted about on inconsequential errands or gossiped at shady corners. The governor, scheming to

feather his own nest by wringing extra taxes from *balata* dealers already overcharged, had bustled about, exuding importance. And at this early hour of comparative coolness the place had been at its busiest. So it should be now.

"Well, here goes," decided the puzzled newcomer. Tossing aside his makeshift hat, he roughly combed his hair with his fingers; then, head up, step aggressive, marched to the bare little plaza, beside which lived the governor. From that official, who had been but thinly polite to the small up-bound expedition, he expected no courtesy now. But, determined to take the bull by the horns, he walked directly to the gubernatorial doorway.

Still he saw nobody, heard nothing but his own footsteps. All about the silent square every door was closed, every window shuttered. And his resounding knocks brought no response.

"Well, I'm damned!" he declared, staring about, then moving on. In the next quarter-hour he traversed the few adjacent streets, all short, all empty. Then, near the waterfront, he spied a house with door open. As he approached, out stepped a stocky, swarthy man who halted and stared.

"*Buenas, dias!*" greeted Pierce. "Where is every one?"

The man's quick eyes flitted over him, taking in at a glance the travel-stained clothing and soggy shoes, returning to dwell briefly on the bearded jaw, the shaggy, hatless hair. His black-lashed lids narrowed, and his slit mouth seemed to harden.

"I say," demanded Pierce, his own gaze chilling, "where is the governor? And what is wrong here?"

His brusque tone and aggressive attitude brought response:

"*Nada*. Nothing is wrong. *El gobernador*—What did you wish from him?"

"That is his business and mine," bluffed the Northerner. "Where is he?"

"Down the river. At Atures—with all others."

"Why?"

"Why? *Cra*, it is the custom! Did you not know? Only in the *balata* season is this town inhabited now. At its end all move down the river to live where it is more healthful. Did not *el gobernador* tell you?"

Poker-faced, Pierce digested this. Inwardly he exulted that he need not interview the suspicious ruler of Amazonas. But what to do now? Something about the lone San Fernandan—his foxy expression, perhaps,—suggested the petty merchant. The refugee played his hunch.

"*Diablo!*" he muttered, looking blank. "Our supplies—Hm!"

A quick glint showed in the cunning brown eyes. The San Fernandan's attitude turned more respectful.

"Supplies, *señor*—ah—Peese? You desire supplies?"

"Pierce is the name. You know me, then?"

"*Sí, sí*. Although, *cra*, you look not the same as when you were here the other time! Supplies for yourself, did you say? You—ah—are going out?"

Pierce scowled.

"Out? Alone? What do you think I am?" he rasped. "Supplies for my whole party—at the Raudal Guaharibo! A boatload—a big boatload! But—*diablo!* That cursed governor—"

He looked angrily toward the plaza. The other chuckled, now very friendly.

"Cursed he is, *señor*, by every one! A boatload of supplies—ah!" He rubbed his hands. "I am a trader, *señor*,—Compero is the name. I can perhaps load your boat—at a price, *señor*, at a price. Food is most scarce—Ah, where is your boat?"

The Northerner still frowned, seemingly ignoring the trader's chatter. Presently he said:

"Eh? Boat? I want a *piragua* load, delivered at the Raudal Guaharibo, I said. But we cannot do business, Com-

pero, without the governor. There were certain arrangements—I must go to Atures and see him."

"But no, *amigo!*" Compero gestured protest. "I understand—your business is done by bank letters, not by heavy hard money. So is mine. No sensible man carries cash upon this river. And that governor—*Cra*, he is a robber, a sneak, a liar—has he not proved it? He would double and redouble, and then again double the price of anything you got through him. I shall treat you fairly, *señor, honorablemente!* Come now, let us go inside out of the sun—you have not even a hat!"

"Lost it in the wreck."

"*Cómo?* Wreck? How is that?"

"*Curial* capsized in a *raudal*. My paddlers are dead. I came on alone."

"Ah, so!" Compero nodded comprehension, eyes again dwelling on the unshaven blond jaw. "*Es lástima*. Too bad. You lost everything—But that shall be remedied at once, *amigo mío!* You are my guest, *señor!* All in my poor house is yours."

Pierce stood as if undecided.

"*Gracias,*" he dryly countered. "But I haven't said I would buy anything from you, *hombre.*"

"Buy? Buy? *Por Dios*, can I not extend courtesy to an honored guest? *Los negocios*—the business shall be another matter, at your convenience, *señor*—ah—Preese. Enter, enter!"

"Well, then, thank you; I will stop awhile."

And, strangling an almost irrepressible impulse to burst into echoing mirth, the honored guest entered. As he regained control of his voice he inquired:

"How does it happen that you stay when all others have gone?"

"I await a boat which is late, *señor*. And it is most fortunate that you come at this time. When I have bought the *balata* cargo I shall induce the owner to load his *piragua* with your supplies and take them up the river for you. He will

do so most gladly; you will find him a most obliging fellow. The name is Jacobo Dominguez."

CHAPTER V

CROSS CURRENTS



BATHED, shaven, shampooed, full fed, the penniless adventurer enjoyed luxurious *siesta* in a wide-meshed *moriche* hammock suspended in a cool, dark room, dirt-floored, clay-walled, heavily shuttered. Outside blazed the grilling sun of late afternoon. Outside also, somewhere, the trader Compero probably was drawing up an outrageously expensive list of supplies which he could assemble from his moldy stock of left-overs. Meanwhile, with specious courtesy, he had thus far refrained from broaching business to his evidently tired guest.

Now came a repeated knock on the heavy door opening on the scraggy *patio*. The drowser yawned, arose, wrapped himself in a thin blanket, opened the portal. Outside stood Compero's slatternly Indian woman-of-all-work, holding Pierce's clothes—washed, mended, ironed. As he received them she droned:

"A *piragua* comes, *señor*."

"Whose? That of Dominguez?"

"No sé," she yawned, turning away. "I don't know."

The Northerner slammed the door and hustled into his garments, subconsciously enjoying their fresh cleanliness, consciously preparing for action. Dressed, buttoned, equipped with the few articles belonging in pockets, he swung out, snatching a new palm *sombrero* from a peg as he walked. Down the brief street he strode and so to the waterside. There stood Compero and two dull-faced peons. And there, laboring heavily toward a mooring, the *piragua* of Jacobo Dominguez forced its slow way against serpen-

tine currents, peons bent to the oars.

Jacobo, bawling commands at the bow, stopped short and scowled at the thinly smiling Northerner. His black hands lifted slightly toward his belt, sank uncertainly as he observed that the blond man's right hand hung suggestively half-concealed in a trousers pocket. As the oars creaked onward Pierce composedly asked the trader:

"Dominguez, you said, is the name?"

"Si," assented Compero.

"Bien." Raising his voice, the inquirer called: "*Señor Dominguez*, a word with you, *pronto*!"

Dominguez glowered, opened his mouth to voice belligerent refusal, but closed it without sound. The Northerner's easy tone, clean clothes, self-assured air, and evident acquaintance with the trader who was to buy the Dominguez cargo all counseled discretion. Wherefore Jacobo outwardly turned attention again to his boat. Compero, though frowning askance at the outlander who seemed bent on going over his head in the forthcoming matter of transportation, likewise held his tongue.

Concentrated on their immediate task, the peons gave no sign of recognizing the alien, although all had seen him and Doe's teeth had momentarily gleamed through his black beard. When the boat lay snug against the bank Dominguez sprang heavily ashore and, face mask-like, approached the casually waiting Northerner. Voice flat, he asked:

"What do you want?"

"A word aside—"

There Compero broke in anxiously:

"To my house, *amigos*! Come! The sun—"

"I will talk to you *pronto*, Compero!" gruffly interposed Dominguez. "At your service, *señor*!"

Eyeing each other sidelong, the enemies walked several paces away. Out of ear-shot, Pierce said:

"Thus far I have said nothing to anyone about your attempt to rob me of

my *curial*. Do you want the story known?"

"Rob you? *Cra*, you are the one who—"

"Shut up! I asked a question."

The thick dark lips opened and shut twice without words.

"If not," pursued Pierce, "my mouth is closed—so long as yours is. I see no profit to either of us in telling that tale. Nor in telling any one we ever met before now."

"True enough," agreed the black, his hostile tone much modified.

"Very well. Now there is a hen on the nest here. Compero expects to send a large load of supplies on your *piragua* to the camp of my expedition at the Raudal Guaharibo. What do you think of that?"

The other blinked, mouth hanging loose.

"*Cómo?*" he puzzled. "Supplies for dead men?"

"Nobody here knows they are dead. Nobody but you and your men. Well?"

A cunning light shot over the heavy dark face.

"Ah! I see! But—" The light faded. "But no, I do not see your game. What can you do with those supplies after you—ah—"

The bushman paused, again perplexed.

"After I get them? That is not the question. Now I am just telling you. Think it over."



JACOBO thought fast, and saw one thing at once: a load of supplies which would cost him nothing. How it was to be obtained by the Northerner, what that Northerner then would try to do with it, and similar questions were unimportant at the moment. And Compero was edging up within hearing distance. With sudden affability the boat-owner loudly declared:

"*Con mucho gusto, señor!* A pleasure to serve you in any way! We shall talk

again later, yes? *Bueno!* Now, Compero—"

He ambled to the trader, patted his near shoulder, swung him toward the deserted town; then, halting, wheeled back toward his *piragua*.

"A moment," he excused himself. And, walking to the boat, he hissed to his men: "*Silencio!* Keep your mouths shut!"

Whereafter he and Compero, pretending deep friendship, proceeded upstreet. The two Compero peons, having been given no orders to work at unloading, promptly disappeared into some cooler place. And Pierce, with a grin at Doe, sauntered aboard the *piragua* as if idly interested in looking her over. The men, tired, sweaty, resting on blocks of *balata*, grinned briefly in response.

"Hullo," drawled Doe, with a half-yawn. "What are you up to now?"

"You'll be surprised," chuckled Pierce. "At present I'm buying supplies with no money, for a camp which doesn't exist, and chartering your skipper to deliver them for nothing. That's about all, so far."

Doe's lips twitched, and his gaze showed inner mirth. But his spoken response was:

"You sure must be a convincing liar."

"Not exactly. I've just done a little amateur acting and let these local smart Alecks draw their own conclusions. Compero's planning to skin me to the backbone. Your boss figures to gyp Compero and me both; also to knife me if he gets me up-river again. Meanwhile, playing one against the other, I get some free meals, a new twenty-cent hat, and maybe some comfortable sleep. And tomorrow's another day."

Doe snickered outright.

"Man, I certainly do admire your nerve!" he admitted. With twinkling eyes he surveyed the lean, clean, well-poised man whom he had last seen as an emaciated wreck. Then his expression grew thoughtful, and he slid a glance along the lifeless waterfront.

"How many in town?" he queried.

"Four, counting Compero's woman."

"Nobody else?"

"Not a soul."

"Uh-huh. There's never a soul here anyway—nothing but bodies, and rotten ones at that."

"You seem to know the place."

"Well enough. We-e-ell enough!"

The drawling voice took on a peculiar timbre, as if something deep within the ragged man were singing. And for a second his lips seemed to hold an inexplicable smile. Abruptly his gaze centered again on Pierce—a keen, penetrating gaze, probing deep.

"Were you waiting here for me?" he asked.

"In a way," nodded the other. "But I can't wait long."

"No. You're on damn' thin ice, mister, and it's likely to crack before another sunrise. Well—"

Doe halted, lips tightening, eyes once more boring into the steady blue regard. At length he drew a long breath, nodded, shot a look at the low sun. In an hour or less, daylight would vanish.

"You said," reminded Pierce, "you had something to tell me at San Fernando. Time's short."

"Exactly. How good are you at burglary?"



THE blond brows drew down. The blue watch chilled.

"Never tried it," Pierce stiffly returned. "And I'm not beginning."

"No?" mocked Doe. "After sticking up my boss—"

"That was a case of dog eat dog. And I'll do that again if necessary. But sneak thievery's not in my line."

"Uh-huh." Doe seemed not displeased by the blunt opposition. "O. K., my honest fellow. I'm rather a novice at that sort of thing myself. Well, now I'm going to spin you a yarn to while away the time. And let's get ashore."

Rising, the lanky laborer stepped to the sun-baked *carroza* of Dominguez; reached in, backed out, holding Jacobo's rifle. At Pierce's surprised look he volunteered:

"When he's away from the boat I'm the armed guard. And I don't trust this town, even if it's stone dead. You never can tell what might sneak in from the woods around here."

The blond man nodded, and, recalling something, asked:

"Did you have any trouble on the river? Four cutthroats in a canoe—"

"You saw those snakes too, did you? Yes, we had a little brush with them—no real trouble, though. We stopped them before they could make trouble."

"How?"

"Saw them first and got to work on them. They tried to sneak in on us under cover of the bank when we were tied up. Dominguez passed out machetes to us and then started shooting—no questions asked. He got two of them cold, and the others went overboard head-first."

"Drowned?"

Doe shrugged.

"*Quién sabe?* We never saw them again. Anyway, this rifle you left to us—"as per my order of even date"—he grinned—"sure came in handy."

"Glad of it. And Dominguez, I suppose, is properly grateful to me."

"Oh, sure. Grateful as a crocodile. Wait till he sees a chance to show it! Now come on over yonder."

He leaped from deck to earth and walked away, followed by Pierce. Together they sat with backs to a shady yellow house-wall, the boat and the river in front, a wide empty space at either side.

"More comfortable," added Doe. "Also away from ears. Those dumbwits don't know English, but they might pick out a name or two that— Well, now listen."

Rifle between updrawn knees, tattered hat over eyes, face fixed toward the va-

cant river, he steadily talked; his voice unemotional, yet somehow vivid, with sometimes a note suggesting an undercurrent of excitement. Soon the listener forgot everything but the story which flowed smoothly toward its climax: a true story of this corrupt settlement on the shore of the black river.

CHAPTER VI

THE KILLER*



GRIPPED by Doe's narrative, Pierce's imagination saw first a trader from the Rio Casiquiare—the sandy stream, now far eastward, which formed a watery road between the river systems of the Orinoco and the Amazon; the jungled river whence now had come Jacobo Dominguez. Unlike Jacobo, this man was outwardly white, or nearly so; inwardly he was even blacker. On that wild borderland between Venezuela and Brazil, where the only enforceable law was that of gun and knife, this man found many a desperado wanted by the prisons or firing squads of several countries. Enemies of all governments, living only for loot and lust, these outlaws needed only a ruthless leader to combine them into a merciless wolf pack. And the petty trader, Tomás Funes, saw and seized his chance to use them in a sudden rise to power.

At that time the *caucho* rubber business of Venezuela still was highly profitable. And in this forested, rivered Territorio de Amazonas was its greatest wealth of *caucho* trees. Along the Alto Orinoco lived many an independent collector of the elastic latex, lord over his own section, tyrant over Indian slaves acquired by the old Spanish system of

forcible impressment, then held in bondage by fear and debt. At San Fernando, the squatty, sickly capital, centered the industry. When from the dim forests journeyed the annual loads of smoked gum won by the sweat and suffering of brutalized "Indian dogs", San Fernando boomed.

Hard men, in from the woods, swaggered about with rifle, revolver, dagger, machete, bawling to friends, brawling with strangers, roaring in rum shops, reeling in the streets, shooting exuberantly into the air or, sometimes, wickedly at chance-met foes. Cheap phonographs belched tinny music from stores and houses wherein waited something for sale. Drunken women screeched ribald songs or vicious anger. Strange dogs from the camps barked, yelped, fought savagely against the town mongrels. Racketing riot ruled the entire place by night; new boatloads of lusty revelers arrived by day, avid for their annual blow-out.

Into such a clamorous scene came Tomás Funes from the Casiquiare. Behind his *piragua*, at seemingly unrelated intervals, other boats rowed or paddled down the busy Orinoco; and not all of these made the roundabout swing up the Atabapo to the anchorage. At Puerto Titi, a landing on the Orinoco side, canoes without cargoes tied up and emptied themselves of shifty-eyed men, poorly clad but well armed. These disappeared into the uninhabited woods and, for a time, were seen no more.

So ended another hot day, and so began another noisy night. Soon the usual uproar was in full swing. At the low clay house tenanted by Federal Governor Pulido, that official lay ill with malaria; his wife, beside an oil lamp, was reading to him from an old Spanish novel. Into the unmelodious medley outside broke fitful, irregular gunshots. Raising her voice a little, Señora Pulido continued reading. Soon, however, she

*This narrative by "Doe" is actual Alto Orinoco history. Arthur Friel was in San Fernando soon after the conclusion of the rule of Funes.—Editor.

paused to listen. The shooting was increasing, coming nearer.

"Read on," yawned the governor. "That is nothing. Some of the men have had too much rum."

But then he, too, grew concerned. Among the roaring reports of the .44's sounded yells not merely boisterous, screams neither mirthful nor quarrelsome, but laden with ferocity or terror. And now the uproar along the short streets swelled into a hideous din in the central plaza, across which it rushed to the governor's own house.

Rising from his couch, the official picked up a revolver, strode to the door, threw it open to demand explanation. Instantly a blast of gunfire knocked him back and down, dead. Into the open portal sprang the killers, grinning like mad beasts, shooting again into the sprawled shape of the murdered man. Then they drew back, obeying the voice of their master, Tomás Funes.

"Outside!" he shouted. "Finish your work!"

As his jungle creatures turned to more slaughter of the fighting or fleeing townsfolk, the burly, black-mustached conqueror stood chuckling at the slain representative of government. His enjoyment increased when the widow, hitherto frozen, screamed madly and threw herself on the body of her man. Laughing harshly, he then turned and left her; he, like his gang, had more work to do outside. And throughout the night that work went on. The sun, rising on a new day, found the town strewn with corpses and spattered everywhere with blood. Every San Fernandan man, woman, and child left alive was thenceforth the slave of the ex-trader, now despot of Amazonas.



FOR this was no mere outlaw raid for quick loot, followed by disappearance into the jungle. Funes had come to stay. Seizing all money and goods in the

town, he forthwith sent picked men down the Orinoco to garrison the overland road beside the otherwise impassable Atures rapids. At other strategic points, especially the Brazilian border, he established similar detachments. Thus he bottled up all rubber dealers in Amazonas. And these he mercilessly, methodically squeezed.

Every outgoing cargo of rubber, every incoming load of supplies or trade goods, paid him heavy tribute. Every property owner or leaser in the territory paid to Funes not only all government taxes and assessments but whatever other charges he chose to levy. To the federal government in faraway Caracas he occasionally remitted a portion of its legal dues—just enough to forestall a punitive expedition by the Venezuelan army, which, though yearning to march upon him, was held back by the distance and difficulties of the long route to his lair. Except for these grudging concessions and the necessary expenses of maintaining his force of cutthroats, Funes kept all his gains.

So passed year after year. Years of terror and murder to the trapped inhabitants of Amazonas, years of unbroken power and profit to the greedy czar of the bush. His "army," augmented by the outcasts of all adjacent regions, held all business men in the grip of fear, all lesser men or women in abject slavery to their criminal impulses. Resistance, even verbal opposition, meant death—not always quick. In this savagery the men merely followed the example of their leader, whose appetite for fresh blood was insatiable as that of any jungle *tigre*. And as time went on he turned his ferocity more and more on the very men whose tribute enriched him—the owners of rubber estates. Accusing these of plots to assassinate him, he began killing them and confiscating their properties.

Coldly, deliberately, he kept two black books. One recorded the names of the

victims already shot or beheaded with machetes—a favorite method of his—and the commercial value of their possessions thus acquired. The other listed those not yet killed, with predetermined dates for their execution. He had squeezed the Territory virtually dry of wealth; now he would take its last drops of life, and so, leaving all Amazonas a desiccated corpse, would depart into Brazil, and thence perhaps to Europe.

Then fell vengeance.

Sunrise flooded the noisome town with new, clean light. Yawning men and frowsy women bestirred themselves to morning activities. A sleepy sentry in a tower of the priestless church perfunctorily eyed the tranquil river Atabapo, saw nothing new, and grumpily awaited his relief. In the woods semicircling the place nothing visibly moved.

But suddenly from those dark trees rang a noise appalling every outlaw—the blare of an army bugle. From elsewhere spoke another—another—half a dozen in swift call and answer. Muffled voices yelled commands. The federal army! Surrounding the town! Attacking!

Stunned for a moment, the criminals of Funes' force then rushed from houses in panic. In that moment the woods spewed assailants, shooting and yelling as they came. Unorganized, demoralized, scared to the cores of their guilty minds, the Funes wolves became rabbits, running madly for cover, diving into holes, even plunging into the river. Funes himself, pallid with fear, found only one man to stand by him—one Lopez. These two, penned in the tyrant's office, waited.

The shooting, shouting skirmishers closed in, seizing the plaza, swarming to Funes' house. The main body, presumably still in the woods, did not advance. The small force of shock troops smashed Funes' door, rushed inside, covered Funes and Lopez with their rifles. Lopez fired, fell mortally wounded by the return fire. Funes quit.



WHILE his sole defender died before his eyes, the dreaded master of Amazonas surrendered tamely. Leaving him guarded, the captors rushed forth again, scattered among streets, disarmed every man found hiding. Then at last the astounded town realized that these were no federal soldiers, that the woods held no federal army, that these daring assailants composed the entire conquering force. Equipped with but few cartridges and with several bugles obtained somehow, they were fearless followers of an audacious revolutionist, Arebalo Cedeño, who was raiding the town to capture Funes' guns and gold.

Cedeño, a clean, adventurous fighter, was no executioner. Although demanding the money and arms he needed, he was willing to leave Funes life and liberty. The fallen despot met the proffer with sullen silence, and was thereupon shut in the town jail to reconsider. Thus he sealed his own doom. For now the surviving townspeople who so long had been his slaves seized both freedom and vengeance. Flocking to Cedeño, they poured into his ears such tales of bestiality and atrocity that he sickened. They told of the two black books of death. These he found and read, then flung down, swearing:

"*Dios mío!* This is no man, but a monster!"

"*Si!* A monster that must no longer live!" retorted the sufferers. Kill him!"

And, vindictive fury mounting, they added:

"Kill him slowly—*poco á poco*—the filthy beast! Make him pay by the hour—by the day—for what he has done to us! Give us his eyes—his tongue—his fingers—one by one! Give us—"

"*Vayase!*" revolted Cedeño. "Get out of here!"

They went, still foaming with bitter rage. Cedeño cogitated. At length he summoned Funes to another conference, renewed his demand for money and am-

munition—and again met obstinate refusal. Power smashed, army fled, Funes knew himself to be at the end of his rope; knew the venomous hate of all Amazonas to be waiting just outside; knew his best hope to be quick death. Reading him, Cedeño let him have it.

Out into the plaza he led the murderer. And, while his men held back the menacing self-avengers, he gave orders to a firing squad. One volley, and the monster was dead.

For several days thereafter Cedeño held the town, questioning, searching, taking whatever he could find that was necessary to his further activities. Then, in canoes and *piraguas*, he and his men went back down the Orinoco to renew their guerilla warfare against the government. With them traveled many of the townsfolk, escaping from hideous bondage to a new, free life outside.

"That," concluded Doe, with a slight quiver in his voice, "was more than a dozen years ago. And from that day to this, the gold of Funes has never been found!"

CHAPTER VII

BY STARLIGHT



FOR a moment Pierce sat silent, staring at the storyteller, whose eyes slid sideways to meet his. In the black-lashed pupils was a gleam which made the blond man's pulses jump.

"You mean—" he asked—"it's here!"

"Where else?" purred Doe.

"Good Lord! All Funes' loot—in this dirty dump?"

"Oh no. Not all of it. Far otherwise. A lot of his plunder wasn't money. The rubber-men up here didn't keep much cash around their *sitios*. They banked it, away down at Ciudad Bolivar, or somewhere else. He took most of his graft in raw rubber, then shipped it out to Bolivar or to Manaos, Brazil, where

he had agents to sell it for him. And when he flopped those agents got rich quick. All the same, he had plenty of coin right here for emergency. A few *morrocotas*—they're about the same as twenty-dollar gold pieces—were found on him after he was shot. Queer, too—they weren't in his pocket, but in pouches strapped to his legs, behind the knees. He sure believed in hiding things."

"And that was all?"

"All that was found."

"But you say Cedeño searched—"

"High and low. So did everybody else. They ransacked every likely or unlikely hidey-hole, and got nothing but sweat, dirt, and cobwebs. And plenty more treasure hunters have snooped around here since. But what was here is still here."

"Hm! Well, then what chance has anybody now?"

"Anybody has about the chance of a snowball in hell. But *somebody* might be lucky, if he had the right steer."

Doe grinned tantalizingly, gauging the eagerness in the blond man's tone and look. Then he jerked his head aside, listening. No sound came from anywhere. But his next words were brisk and direct.

"It'll be dark *muy pronto*. D'you want to take a walk tonight?"

"Why not?"

"O. K. Got a window in your room?"

"Yes."

"Bars?"

"No. Thick shutter, swinging in. Can be barred from inside."

"Good! Hang your bandanna out over the sill. When you hear a mouse gnawing the shutter, open up."

"All right. But what—"

"You'll see what's what. Be sure your gun's in good order. And lay off the rum."

"Rum? I haven't seen any yet."

"You will. Compero and Dominguez are getting lubricated now. They always do, the first night we're here. They'll

try to get you oiled up too, and see what you'll blab. Duck 'em! Now, so long!"

Rising, the guard walked to the boat, the rifle in his fist swinging in short, nervous jerks. His quick stride, too, betrayed inner excitement. Pierce, feeling another leap of pulse and a hot glow of visionary anticipation, marched to the street corner, then slacked into a casual saunter. On arrival at the Compero doorway he affected a yawn and a bored slouch.

"Ah! Here is *el señor* now!" vociferated the trader, rising from a table in the *patio*. "I was about to come seeking you, *amigo*! You are just in time to join us in a little appetizer."

From a fat rum-bottle he slopped pale liquid into a crockery cup.

"*Gracias*, but no," smiled Pierce. "I have a touch of headache."

"Ah, so? *Es lástima*. But this will cure it."

"It never does. Let Señor Dominguez take my medicine for me, if he doesn't mind."



JACOBO, grinning greasily, did not mind. His black paw promptly clutched at the cup, which Compero perforce surrendered; his thick mouth guzzled the fiery liquor with a sucking noise like that of a hog at a trough. Lapping his lips, he beamed alcoholically at the Northerner whom, a few days ago, he had yearned to kill. Evidently he was already quite well lubricated. Compero, too, showed signs of having imbibed. His eyes were rather glassy.

"Ho, ho, ho! Well, then let us eat!" he guffawed. "Inside, *amigo*. Night is here, and the dew. Jacobo *mío*, can you walk? Ho ho ho!"

"Walk? *Cra!*" snorted Jacobo, rising smoothly as a cat. As the three moved to an inner room he showed no unsteadiness. Nor, for that matter, did his host. Clapping his hands, Compero summoned the woman, who lighted a kerosene lan-

tern, hung it on a peg, and brought hot supper on a huge tray. Already it was night.

Around a small square table the eaters sat, each with no man at his immediate right or left. Such was etiquette at San Fernando, where in past years more than one diner, seated between two jovial "friends," had been engaged in talk by the one and shot or knifed by the other. And even now, from force of habit, the two natives frequently darted sidelong glances at each other's hands. The Northerner ate with complete confidence, inwardly laughing.

"Set a thief to catch a thief," he reflected, "and a crook to watch a crook. Man, this is rich!"

He ate as greedily and speedily as his ill-bred companions, although his method was less efficient; he used his knife for cutting, not for shoveling. Full-fed, he pushed back the wooden box which had been his seat and arose.

"*Muy bueno*," he complimented the vanished food. "And now to bed I go."

"*Cómo?*" protested Compero, amazed. "To bed? Now? *Dios mío*, you slept almost all day! And—"

"And I still am sleepy," cut in Pierce. "It is the reaction, perhaps, from the long journey on the river."

"But, *señor*, you should drink a night-cap of rum for your health! And sit and talk awhile for your digestion. I will fetch a bottle—"

"No, thanks! Tomorrow, perhaps. *Buenos noches!*"

And out he walked to his own door, leaving both men scowling. Then grunted Jacobo:

"*Marica!* A milksop, that one! Let him go. But bring the bottle. Or two bottles. I will pay for it, if you need the money."

Muttering something, Compero went for more *caballo blanco*. Pierce, after quietly barring his door, groped to the outer window, softly opened the shutter, and looked out.

The night was dark, and would remain so; for the old moon which had wanly lighted his way down the river now was dead, the new one not yet bright. However, the gloom was not impenetrable, for the clear sky of the dry season shed its own faint sheen from countless stars. Across the unpaved street the pallid wall of another house was dimly visible; to right and left was nothing but empty vagueness. A ghostly place, peopled only by, perhaps, the bodiless phantoms of men—and women and children too—brutally murdered by Funes and his soulless pack.

Leaning there on the sill, reviewing in the somber stillness the grim history narrated by Doe, the listener almost fancied he could distinguish dark corpses littering the funereal earth outside, hear rustlings of spectral feet and almost inaudible screams—phantoms of sound, still lingering about the lifeless walls wherein had been enacted inhuman deeds. In him grew a feeling of repulsion toward that outer dark, such as he had never known, even in the dolorous forests of the Guaharibos, and still less in the lonely solitudes of the nearer Orinoco.

Something counseled him to close his shutter, to light the candle beside his hammock, and even then to keep alert, with gun ready to shoot at some nameless thing lurking near. It was, perhaps, an actual emanation from the treacherous town, like the malarial exhalation from a fever-swamp—invisible, intangible, yet ominously real. With a jerk of the shoulders, he threw off the morbid influence of the past to consider the imminent future.



THOSE rustlings, those squeaks, he told himself, were but the movements and voices of rats or mice. And as soon as some mouse gnawed at this window he was going out to face—what? Why did Doe, with his long story and his

mysterious semi-promise, want him outside? Why, if Doe actually knew where lay hoarded treasure, did he not take it himself, unaided? No man was fool enough to invite a virtual stranger to participate in his findings. Not unless he needed that stranger's help—and, as likely as not, meant to get rid of him as soon as possible thereafter. There was a trick in the thing somewhere, and—

Pierce straightened up, twitching his shoulders again. The San Fernando atmosphere of treachery still was working on him, he thought angrily. Doe was a pretty decent sort; if he needed watching, he, Pierce, had two good eyes, not to mention fists, feet, and a six-gun. So what? So hang out your bandanna, you old woman, and see what happens! Thus bullying himself, he did. As he laid the dark cloth across the sill he wondered how Doe or any one else could distinguish it in such dimness. But that was up to Doe.

Feeling his way back to the hammock, he lay in it, legs outside, feet dangling, eyes on the open window. His instructions, implied if not expressed, had been to close the shutter; but he chose otherwise. Sight adjusted to the gloom, he could see the opening quite plainly; and he wished to see also the "mouse" when it arrived outside.

A long time passed. Patient, yet growing restless, he waited, unconsciously swinging his legs, flexing his feet, moving his hands. Accustomed now to nocturnal wakefulness and work on the river, his body yearned for activity. Yet he realized that nothing was likely to develop until Dominguez and Compero had separated for the night. Jacobo, he guessed, probably would return to his *carroza* to sleep, on guard over his cargo.

Once or twice he arose intending to unbar the door, listen, learn whether the rascally pair were about ready to call it a day. But he refrained. The moment might be inopportune; a creak of the door might be heard and arouse sus-

picion. So he again lay down and resumed his muscular fidgeting.

All at once he stiffened, straightened up, sat alert. Outside the darksome rectangle of window was something darker. Something slid softly along the sill; fingers, perhaps, feeling for the bandanna. Followed a faint grunt; a momentary pause, while the dark shape felt for the shutter which should be closed but was not; then a bump of knuckles, and a small, insistent scratching of nails simulating mouse teeth on wood.

Silently advancing, Pierce faced Doe. At close range the sallow face above the black beard was unmistakable. As his own face appeared the other drew back with a brief whisper:

"All set. Let's go!"

Without reply Pierce straddled the sill and slid out. As he swung through, an unseen nail-head protruding from the jamb caught his shirt at a shoulder. The ripping noise seemed loud as the shriek of a siren.

"Damnation!" he swore.

"Shut up!" hissed Doe. "Come on!"

But Pierce, turning, halted short, hand in gun-pocket. A few feet away stood another dark shape.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"Tell you later."

"Tell me now!"

"Oh hell, all right! This is Paco—one of my fellow slaves. You'll recognize him soon."

"What do we need him for?"

Doe's teeth gritted audibly.

"Damn it, *will* you get away from here?" he hoarsely demanded. "He's our guide. Are you coming or not?"

After eyeing both men, the suspicious outlander acquiesced:

"Lead on."



DOE whirled, whispered to the silent figure, walked noiselessly a way. The others, equally stealthy, followed. Up the middle of the way they walked to a

corner, where Doe stopped to look back and listen. Darkness and quiet lay thick, unbroken by light or noise of pursuit. With a satisfied murmur Doe said something to Paco, who now took the lead.

"Now," quietly continued Doe, in English, "this is the layout, Pierce: This lad knows the way if anybody does. I think he's square, but I'm not dead sure. I mean as square as could be expected. I know he's got a streak of yellow. He may be a liar too. We'll soon know that. But if the stuff's there—well, a yellow streak can crop out in more than one way. Your job's to watch him and, if he turns treacherous, gun him down!"

"Oh, is that all? Just pop him off for you?"

"Feeling sarcastic tonight, are you? Yes, that's all—if he needs it. For me and you both, fellow. He packs a knife inside his pants, and he's quick as a snake with it if he takes the notion. Otherwise you wouldn't be let in on this deal. I've no gun, and I'm no knife-fighter. Besides which, I've been through a lot down here, and I'm about burned out; couldn't last through a rough-and-tumble and come out on top. Now do you get my viewpoint?"

The straightforward explanation disarmed the listener's suspicion.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "That clears up the picture considerable. I'm with you all the way."

"All right. Chances are that he'll go straight, especially with you behind me. If not, don't stall. Shoot, and make it fast."

The low-toned converse ceased. As the three walked onward Pierce shifted his weapon from pocket to waistband, sliding it under his belt at the left front, ready for quick draw. His spare cartridges, deep in the left pocket, clicked dully together at each forward stride; sinking a hand to them, he purposely made them rattle. Paco's dark head seemed to turn a little, listening, recognizing, comprehending that the man who

once had bluffed his boss was not relying this time on empty shells. Doe's teeth glimmered amid the gloom.

Although stockily built and apparently clumsy, the peon was cat-footed and seemingly cat-eyed. Twice the white men stumbled over undetected bumps of hard-baked clay which their leader had not touched. They now had debouched from the narrow street into the broader but rougher plaza, where a few trees sighed drearily in a clammy breeze. Diagonally across the open space the guide trudged, moving faster now, toward a corner where rose another of the uniform house walls. Pierce's breath quickened. On that corner was the San Fernando headquarters of the governor of Amazonas: the house which, years ago, had been seized and thereafter used by Tomás Funes.

Beside that wall all stopped to look about and listen again. As before, the hamlet seemed lightless and lifeless as a cemetery. Yet for a long moment the peering peon fixed his gaze on something across the plaza, and for several seconds he seemed to grow rigid. Presently, however, he relaxed and moved on along the wall. At a shuttered window he paused, reached between outer bars, felt the wooden blind, pushed repeatedly. Nothing resulted. The dense obstruction remained immovable. He passed on to the next black rectangle in the stone-like clay.

Window after window he tried, working around a corner and down a byway. The combined domicile and administrative building, one-storied like all others, occupied a small square block. Rounding another corner, trying again, the fellow made his first vocal sound: a grunt of triumph. His pressure had caused a creak, almost a scraping squeak. Repeating, he evoked a loose rattling. Forthwith he drew his knife, tapped one of the intervening bars. The dull response was not that of metal. These bars at the rear were but hard wood.

The knife gnawed steadily, like a big rat. The noise seemed louder at each bite. Gradually one vertical bar was cut through at the base. Breathing hoarsely, the whittler attacked the other with increased speed. The white men, frowning, watched to right and left, seeing nothing, yet feeling that they were watched. But at length Pierce laughed shortly and spoke in normal tone.

"We're nervous fools. The town's empty except at Compero's place. And he and Dominguez are sleeping off a jag—"

"Pipe down! 'Don't kid yourself!' muttered Doe. 'Dominguez isn't soused. Just comfortably lit. And he always sleeps with one ear open—Paco! *Cuidado!* Careful—Oh, hell's bells!'"

Crash!

Paco, now hot with haste, had lost his head. With the second bar severed, he had seized the loose ends and heaved. His powerful tug had broken away the rest of the frame with a rending clatter.

And now, springing up on the sill, he hurled his solid weight against the loose shutter. Something gave way with a snap like a pistol shot. The barrier jumped back, banged loudly against the inner wall. The peon fell sprawling inside, knocking over something—an empty cask, it proved—which gave forth a hollow, resonant boom.

Doe stood frozen, teeth set as if in utter agony. Then, with a tigerish leap, he bounded up through the black rectangle, gasping:

"Quick! Inside!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOARD



INSIDE the black room Pierce stood with head out, watching warily, listening apprehensively for an indication of activity on shore or river. Behind him, in low tones vibrant with fury, Doe

cursed the blundering peon, who snarled back half-articulate attempts at exculpation. Upset physically and mentally by his own loss of self-control, half angered and more than half scared, the fellow soon began to mouth retaliatory oaths. Pierce, turning on both men, stopped their tongues with one hissing command:

"*Silencio!*"

Silenced, they listened as breathlessly as he. Presently he drew back, felt about for the shutter, swung it shut with hardly a sound.

"*Nada,*" he informed them. "Nothing. At least, nothing noticeable. Now what?"

Despite himself his voice shook, and he became aware of cold sweat trickling down his back. Doe's reply held a similar tremor.

"L-lights, I guess—before we gum the game any more. S-sure that shutter's tight?"

"Tight as it ever will be."

Ensued fumbling sounds, a match-scratch, a candle-flame. Blinking in the light, the three found themselves in a disordered store-room, containing only empty barrels, oil tins, and bottles. Grasping one of the latter, Doe jammed his candle into its neck. Pierce, examining the rusty shutter-bolt broken by Paco, found it snapped off short. So he wedged the barrier with a small stick from a pile of kindling and prompted:

"Well?"

Paco, taking the candle, again led the way. Into a bare kitchen they passed; then, unhooking a door, out into the *patio*. There the guide paused, looking all about with queer nervousness: queer, because he had shown none out in the open town, while now he was protected on all sides by the uninhabited house. In his right hand glimmered his bare knife, blade forward.

"*Vamonos!*" urged Doe. "Let's go! What ails you?"

Half reluctantly the guide resumed motion. Across the open square he plodded, to halt at another closed door.

Experimental shoves proved it somewhat loose. Passing over the light, he braced himself and smote it with a heavy shoulder. Three times he thus battered, causing muffled thumps but no reverberant echoes. The fourth attack broke another rusted fastening and opened the way. Pugnacity aroused by his fight against wooden opposition, the brown man entered with a truculent swagger.

Darkness and musty air alone lay within. The recent tenants, departing down-river, had carried with them all furnishings. Through a connecting door, unlocked, the peon advanced with the candle into another bare room; and across this to a door in a far corner. This, when opened, disclosed only an empty closet.

"*Aquí,*" granted Paco. "Here."

Wordless, the white men peered over his shoulders, frowned at the clay floor and walls, then scowled at him and each other. Absolutely nothing was there; nothing but a row of hardwood pegs, set in the wall as clothes hangers. The two stepped back, eyeing the wooden-faced peon with mounting hostility.

"If this is your idea of a practical joke," grated Pierce, fists closing. "I'll show you a better one! That flat nose of yours will be a damn' sight flatter when—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Doe. "There must be more to this. He'd never do all this work to—Paco! Where is it?"

The brown fellow was grinning—a dour grin of saturnine humor at the puzzled whites. Deliberately he stamped on the floor, rapped on the walls. The hard, solid sounds indicated no hidden hollow.

"Many *hombres,*" he shouted, "done so, and so. No good. But—"

He paused, studying the pegs, seeming to count them. Abruptly he shoved against one near a corner. A gritty rasp sounded. The peg shortened. Pushing harder, he forced the pin inward until it was flush with the wall. With a grudging

ing scrape, that whole wall swung slowly ajar on unseen hinges. A false wall—a ponderous door, too thick to give out telltale answers to questing knockers—it masked a black cavity and a blacker pit.

This much the crowding white men saw, and no more at the moment. Clammy air, chill and stale, exhaled from the emptiness and drowned the wavering candle-flame. Thus smitten blind, the peon voiced a queer croak and violently backed, ramming the men behind him out into the larger room. Pierce, knocked nearly off balance, almost fell.

"*Fo'jort*" gasped the guide. "*Fo'jer!* Match!"

His voice was hoarse with panic. As Doe, muttering, relighted the candle the brown hand holding it shook, and in the new light the brown visage betrayed ardent terror. Chin trembling, eyes bulging, Pace stared fearfully toward the secret door.

"*El mano de Funes!*" he mouthed. "The hand of Funes—it struck—"

"Blah!" scoffed Doe. "The hands of Funes burn in hell!"

"But no—I felt the cold touch—I smelled the decay—"

"Rotten air, you fool! Nothing more! Are you a man, or a sniveling brat afraid of the dark?"



THE sneering scorn dominated the superstitious fright, steadying the shaking hands, closing the loose mouth with a click. But the stocky shape stood balkily still, eyeing the black cavity with undiminished aversion. And for the moment Doe himself made no new advance.

"We'd better wait," he conceded, "till the air in there changes—and this ghost-dodger gets his nerve back. I'm not surprised. He's said before now that he'd never go in first."

"He told you all about this before, then?"

"No. Only that it was in a hole, and

we could get it together if we were lucky enough to find the town deserted."

"And how would he know that?"

"Says he lived in San Fernando as a boy, in Funes' time. But that doesn't explain—"

He paused, then questioned the peon, whose mouth opened and closed without reply. Habitual reticence seemed still strong. As Doe prodded him, however, the locked tongue loosed; and, in bush dialect which Pierce found hard to follow, a short but steady stream of words poured forth.

"Uh-huh. Now we've got it," announced Doe, as the guttural voice stopped. "And, considering Funes' character, it makes sense."

"Funes always was afraid of assassination or capture and execution. That's generally known. His first intention in making this hole was to construct a tunnel under the street outside and up into another house, where he kept one of his women. But before it got that far the woman died suddenly—poison, perhaps—anyway, one of those things that often happened. And he gave up the idea. Thought the tunnel would work both ways, maybe, letting some enemy get through to him. This room, by the way, was his bedroom."

"So then he used the hole as his vault. Nobody living knew of it, because he killed the men who made it. Just like the old pirate stuff, you know. The diggers never left here alive, nor the fellow who made the trick door. That fellow, it seems, was some sort of European—maybe one of those escaped convicts from French Guiana, over east—and a clever craftsman. Funes kept him here in the house, treating him royally, till the job was done, then shot him."

"This fellow Paco, here, was the son of an Indian scrubwoman and general slavey here in the house; doesn't know who his father was. He wasn't allowed around the place, but he sneaked in sometimes when Funes was away. You

know how kids are. And one time when his mother was swabbing out this room and closet, by order of the housekeeper, she leaned hard on that peg and the wall opened. It worked easier then than now. The kid, Paco, was with her, carrying water. And, feeling smart before his mother, he went down in. She got him out quick and shut the place up and warned him never to tell, or the hand of Funes would destroy him. She was so scared herself that she couldn't work in here any longer. And she didn't live another day.

"Funes, coming back from somewhere, smelt a rat somehow and killed the woman. He sent a man out to bring in Paco, too, but the kid knew what that meant and managed to make a getaway into the woods. And he kept going. He's never been back till within the last year, and never trusted anybody then. Even now he's afraid of that old hellion's ghost. But—well, we can move now. Paco, *vamos!*"



HE grasped the bottled candle from the hesitant brown man and advanced, sniffing the air. As the light receded Paco hung wavering, then followed fast. Pierce, rear guard, found part of his mind perversely debating one apparent flaw in the tale: If Funes had killed his workers, how could this man know who built the door? Only by guesswork—or by some unexplained leak of the knowledge before the defensive murders were committed. In case of some such leak, was not this hole already looted?

"Oh, shut up!" he combated the worrisome thought. "We'll soon know!"

At the yawning cavity Doe stopped, testing the air with nose and flame. His fingers trembled visibly with nervous eagerness, but otherwise he was steady as stone. In the damp chill still exuding from underground the candle-light wavered uncertainly, but burned on, without diminution. The bearded man voiced

a satisfied murmur, then stepped onward and down.

His head sank below floor level, turned, nodded to his followers. Again Paco balked; but, with Pierce's firm hand between his shoulder-blades, moved ahead. His knife, extended before him as if to impale any leaping assailant, gleamed again. Pierce frowned, but said nothing. That blade, sustaining the fellow's crumbling courage, was a help, not a menace to his companions.

Under foot was a short stair of clammy but strong wood. At either side the narrow passage, hewn from the thick clay wall, scraped shoulders. Halfway down Pierce stopped, scanning the heavy door.

"Wait a minute," he demurred. "Hold the light up!"

"What for?" snapped Doe, wheeling.

"To make sure about this tricky door. It may have more tricks than one."

"That's a thought," admitted the other.

Guardedly Pierce grasped the swinging clay, moved it almost shut, ready to resist any treacherous mechanism designed to imprison intruders. There was none. The door, though ingenious, was simple: heavy wood, faced on the closet side with clay, and operated by a latch and wire. The wire, attached to the false peg, ran through a ring screwed in the wood, thence downward to the latch-bar. Pressure on the peg would pull the wire taut and raise the latch from its socket. A coil spring affixed to the peg returned it to position when the pressure was released. Although much labor and extreme accuracy had been necessitated to construct and hang the door, the basic idea of the working parts was merely that of a push-button.

"All right," announced the examiner, resuming progress. The light moved on.

Crowded close, the three shuffled forward a few feet, turned a corner—and halted.

"Ah-h-h!" breathed Doe. Paco voiced

a triumphant expletive. Pierce's face flamed.

The unfinished tunnel beneath the narrow street seemed very short. Walled and ceiled by half-hewn, close-laid timbers, it was choked with wooden boxes. Lowest and largest bulked a sizable chest, dark, evidently heavy, made from some dense tropical wood. On it rose smaller boxes of similar material, neatly stacked. Behind these, the tops of other boxes much cheaper in appearance were partly visible. Paco's dream was true, Pierce's misgiving false. The cache of Funes, sought by many an avid treasure hunter, was unlooted.

"Boy!" exulted Pierce. "If that's all gold— But it can't be! Such things don't happen!"

His voice seemed a harsh, dry croak. Doe, answering, spoke more normally, yet with evident strain.

"Afraid not. We



couldn't move out a tenth of it, anyway. But—"

Swiftly he set the light on an upper box, seized another, tried to raise its lid.

"Locked!" he grumbled. Then, lifting the whole box: "Umph! Man, it's heavy!"

There he lurched aside, crowded by Paco, who, with a greedy noise, clutched another box and yanked it to him. Too late he realized its weight. It slipped,

fell, struck hard on his broad bare feet.

His knife, which he had tried to hold between thumb and forefinger while grasping the box, also tumbled to the floor.

"*Dios!*" he hissed, teeth set with pain, face contorted with anger. The next instant he staggered back, clutched by Pierce, who snapped:

"Doe! Get that knife!"



DOE, eyes agleam, swooped on the fallen blade. Paco, cursing, heaving, fought to escape, but failed until his captor voluntarily released him. Thereupon Doe, with the knife suggestively ready, tongue-lashed the peon in the most searing argot

of the bush. When he finished, the brown man was a sulky, slouching statue of gloom, scowling dejectedly at his hurt feet.

"Good eye, Pierce!" added Doe. "He'd have gone hog-wild in another minute. I'm glad it happened. He's harmless now. And now let's see—"

With the captured weapon he tried to pry up the lid of his own box.

"Nope. That lock's tough," he admitted. "I'd only break the blade. Well, watch him, Pierce. I'll go topside and see what I can find."

Leaving the candle, he went out, lighting matches as he moved. During his absence Paco, squatting, rubbed his feet, eyed Pierce sidelong, met uncompromising vigilance, and said nothing. Presently Doe returned, humming cheerfully, bringing a broken but thick half-machete and a mallet. With these crude tools he again assailed the box, driving the stout steel under the top, then tugging upward. The lock broke.

"Ha!" exulted the worker. "It is gold!"

Gold it was. Gold coins in disarray, somewhat discolored by disuse and dampness, but indubitable. Gold of more than one nation—Venezuela, England, France, America, perhaps others—whatever gold the traders or bankers to north or south had had on hand when the tyrant of Amazonas required it. To the penniless discoverers it seemed all the gold of all the world.

"So far, so good," approved Pierce, his dry tone belied by his glowing gaze. "How about the rest?"

Doe attacked the rest. Mouth tight, eyes alternately watching him and Paco—who now, his hurts forgotten, stood fascinated—Pierce saw what each box revealed. Gold, gold, more gold—then an end of it. Silver, a big bulk, mostly Venezuelan *bolivares*, worth about twenty cents each; a ponderous, dull-colored mass much too heavy to carry

off, and seeming now mere chicken-feed. The chest, unexpectedly, was found to be unlocked; and in it lay a queer miscellany of stuff, mostly worthless now—clothing, masculine or feminine, rotted by moisture; jewelry, real or imitation; dark candlesticks which might be solid silver; and other articles of the same sort, which the finders left unexamined. Behind all this, in the cheaper boxes, were what seemed greater treasures.

Rifles. Revolvers. Cartridges. Machetes. Some boxes were partly open, some still nailed tight. The rifles were repeaters of the usual lever-action, big-bored bush type. The revolvers, few in number, were heavy weapons of the same caliber. The ammunition was plentiful; the machetes more so. And all three men, who had passed over the silver money with some contempt, grinned happily at sight of the steel.

But then Doe, levering open a new rifle coated with protective hardened grease, muttered a rueful curse. The magazine and barrel were thickly plastered with the same dark stuff.

"Cosmolene, I bet," he grumbled. "A mess to clean out, anyway—and no cleaning rods handy, nor time to do the job. And, damn it, these old cartridges are probably duds by now. Well, we'll take plenty, anyway—"

"How? And where?"

The incisive questions brought a worried look to the bearded face. The brown eyes slid dourly to Paco.

"If luck holds, and this slew-footed jackass didn't wake up every sleeper in South America, we can sneak our stuff out in your canoe. I had it brought up from where you abandoned it, and berthed it with paddles ready for a quick getaway. But it'll be sly work at best, and—"

With a shrug, he left the rest unsaid. Turning to the gold, he concluded:

"*Vamos.*"

CHAPTER IX

TRAPPED



SLOWLY the shutter at the store-room window swung open, its uncoiled hinges emitting only the faintest of squeaks. Slowly a head moved outward; a blond head, with steely blue eyes swinging from side to side, intent ears strained for the slightest ominous sound. It hung motionless, searching every splotch of deeper shadow in the semi-visibility of star-light; then drew back with an audible release of pent breath. A low voice said:

"All quiet, so far."

"O. K. Get going," murmured another subdued tone.

Over the sill slid a long leg, followed by a lithe body which twisted and dropped nimbly to the ground. After another look around him the man outside prompted:

"Hand it over."

Out came a box, not large but weighty. Four more followed, each making a gritty noise on the sill, drawing an almost inaudible grunt from the receiver. Then emerged a broad, muscular brown man and a lanky, lighter one, scrambling through hastily but quietly. The last turned, reached within, drew the shutter carefully closed. Then all looked around once more.

All were half naked. Their shirts, torn into broad strips and then twisted, had become crude ropes to knot around the boxes—those boxes which, with locks broken, must have their lids tied down. All three were armed—but not alike. Pierce, advance guard, had his one revolver under his belt. Doe, rear guard, toted two guns; two of the heavy six-shooters, loaded with dubious cartridges, from the Funes arsenal. These, unlike the rifles, had been only lightly coated inside with preservative; although still stiff and slow of action, they might

be serviceable at a pinch. Paco, the unreliable, had his knife again in its sheath, but no firearm.

There had been more trouble with the uncouth, half-civilized peon inside. First, his greed reviving at sight of the gold, he had demanded that most of the treasure be his. He alone had found it, he asserted; the white men had only helped. To which Doe had retorted acidly that but for them he would never have reached it, and that if his clumsy blunders had not already ruined their chances of a getaway he could have only his due one-third. Accepting this dictum with a morose growl and an ominous glower, the fellow then had tried to arm himself, like Doe, with two revolvers. Whereupon Pierce had bluntly declared:

"Nothing doing! Not a gun, not a bullet, for you, *hombre!* We don't trust you. We'll do any shooting that's necessary."

"But, *cra*, I must protect myself and my own from any robbers—"

"You'll be protected," promised Doe. "And if you behave you may have your knife. That's enough. Now shut up, or we'll tie you and leave you here with the ghost of Funes!"

Scared by that threat, the rebel had acquiesced. From that moment he had been so docile that, as he was about to go through the window, Doe had given him his knife. For the rest of the night, at least, he would undoubtedly stand by his partners.

Now that they were out of that clammy crypt, out of the black den of the cold-blooded killer, out in the soft breezes and the clean starshine, all breathed deep of the open air and faced the night with alert caution. Before them might lurk peril, perhaps deadly danger; but no menace yet showed. Behind them the silver and steel of Funes were again hidden from all men by the false wall, awaiting the return of these three alone—if ever they should wish to return. Of their clandestine visit no trace remained, save

a few burnt matches scattered inside and the broken wooden bars outside. To any trailers on the morrow these would be but futile clues, leading nowhere.

Now Doe nudged Paco and pointed downward. The fellow stooped, hooked strong fingers under the cloth straps, straightened with a box hanging from each big fist. Doe, readjusting the awkward guns at his waistline, bent in his turn and grasped two more. His joints crackled as he lifted; but, up again, he stood steady, albeit set-faced. Pierce heaved the fifth box high on a shoulder, balancing it with his left hand; then, with revolver ready in the right, started away.



STEPPING short, they tramped around the corner and down the narrow street leading toward the river. Paco, despite his load and his bruised feet, walked smoothly as ever, shuffling over lumps without mishap. Doe, stiff-gaited, stumbled, swore through clenched teeth, but maintained balance and grip. Muscles, hardened by weary leagues of labor at the sweeps, bore their burden now with tenacious endurance. Pierce, with half the weight carried by the others, found his one-sided load onerous, interfering with his watch to the left; but he plodded on without change.

Another corner approached. Passing it, they peered into the dimness of the cross street, seeing nothing. One more short block, and they would emerge in the open land skirting the water. Already they could see the erratic reflections of stars mirrored in the black stream out ahead. In a few more minutes—

"Crrra!"

The raucous expletive burst from Paco. His boxes dropped. His head ducked, his torso twisted with snaky speed, swinging him around. At the instant Doe loosed his load and dodged side-

wise, turning in air like a cat. Pierce, a little ahead, swung hastily, still holding his burden, to witness an amazingly swift fight.

From the murk of that apparently lifeless side street had sneaked three shadowy men, stealthily pursuing, swooping now at the backs of the treasure-bearers, whom they had allowed to pass. As Paco and Doe dodged at the last instant, murderous machetes whistled through the air where their heads had been. The dark-faced wielders of those blades spun half off-balance from the force of their missed strokes. Before they could recover, their victims were upon them.

Like leaping *tigres* Paco and Doe sprang in. Scuffles, blows, a strangled cry, all passed in an instant, ending in dull bumps on the ground. Pierce, bounding back, unable to shoot lest he hit his friends, found both Paco and Doe attacking the third man, who had turned to flee and now gasped a vain plea for quarter. Down he went, struck repeatedly by both his captors. A bubbling, gurgling groan sounded, died out. On the earth lay three contorted shapes which did not move. Breathing harshly, their conquerors stepped back, watching suspiciously.

"What the devil—" wondered Pierce, scowling down. "Who are they?"

Doe, holding an unfired revolver, yanked the third huddled form over on its back. Pierce recoiled. The upturned face, staring at him, eyes now sightless, was that of Compero.

"Your pal!" twitted Doe. "Regular San Fernando stuff—smooth to your face, striking from behind, without warning. Well, he's got his! And these other snakes, too, I guess. Hm! Yes, that settles it!"

As he spoke, Paco stooped over one of the motionless Compero peons, pushed, arose, wiped his long knife on his ragged breeches. Then, with a wolf-

ish grin at his partners, he shambled back to his gold.

"Ugh!" muttered Pierce. "He—he knifed 'em all."

"Two, anyway. And three, now. This last one was mine. All I could do was slug with the gun. Fingers too stiff—and gun too—for shooting. Guess I brained the bum, at that. He hasn't moved since. But Paco believes in finishing things. Come on!"



HIS staccato sentences and jerky looks around betrayed much more excitement than his callous words. Pierce drew back and plodded away, walking in a half-daze. So sudden and brief had been the combat that even now it seemed hardly credible—a momentary nightmare while he walked in his sleep. Then, as his mind cleared, he wondered at the comparative silence of the whole affray; and, thinking further, guessed its reason.

Compero and his peons, fearing the larger gang of Jacobo Dominguez—perhaps believing Pierce somehow in league with them—had meant, no doubt, to strike these three dead in their tracks, conceal both the bodies and the loot immediately, and appear utterly ignorant about the missing men in the morning. So, attacking with reptilian noiselessness, they had subconsciously maintained their secrecy even while dying.

With that conclusion Pierce became again alert to what lay ahead. Doe and Paco, with mouths and muscles again set, were plodding close beside him; all three had reached the end of the street. Now they peered vainly toward the *piragua*, invisible against the night-shrouded shore upstream, and turned their own course down-river. At last their way seemed clear. Out of the close confines of walled footways, they could see farther around them and discern no danger. Black trees loomed here and there, spreading afar overhead, yet vacant underneath. Nearer and nearer to

their oblique march came the inky river with its star-spots and its somnolent murmur of rock-torn water down below, beyond the one bad point. Back at the cargo-boat Jacobo probably slumbered in alcoholic tranquillity, his peons in the stupor of long labor ended. Thus encouraging themselves, the trio quickened their pace toward their waiting canoe.

In among waterside trees Doe headed, breathing hard through his nose. Then opened a shelving inlet, wherein floated a long solid shape; the dugout. On the shore edge they set down their burdens and rested a moment, flexing fingers nearly benumbed, rubbing strained shoulders, relaxing bodies and minds. From Doe broke a joyous chuckle.

Then he froze. From somewhere near by—somewhere among the flanking trees—came another chuckle; a mocking, throaty chuckle of derisive triumph. With it blended the metallic click of a gun-lock.

"Stand still, *burros!*" ordered the jeering voice of Jacobo Dominguez. "Stand and flap your ears, little asses! That load you have brought to me seems heavy. You shall work no more—just now. You, there, Señor Yellow-head, drop also the load you still carry—that revolver. Throw it this way, *pronto!*"

Pierce stiffened, gun half raised, eyes searching the impenetrable gloom amid the thick growth. The voice, slightly muffled, evidently came from behind a tree. The click of the rifle-hammer testified that death hung poised within the crook of one finger. Faint rustles on each side of the trapped trio indicated the presence of other ambushed men—Jacobo's peons, now undoubtedly armed with machetes and ruthlessly ready to butcher their own recent co-workers. To shoot, with no visible target, would be worse than useless. Yet the Northerner refused tame submission.

"Like hell I will!" he jarred.

A thick, malignant laugh answered. Then:

"You will! Or take a bullet where it hurts most. Throw it!"

With the last words the voice turned savage. And at that moment Pierce felt something queer from behind. Something cold and hard pressed against his empty left hand; and over his shoulder came Doe's whisper:

"Throw this one!"

The hard object was one of the Funes revolvers, not yet proven reliable. Pierce grasped eagerly at the ruse. With Doe and Paco close behind him his own movements must be, he knew, somewhat indistinct. Letting his own weapon sink, he stood a second with hands down, as if still balky, yet beaten. In that second he changed guns behind his back. Then, with a morose growl, he tossed the Funes firearm toward a clump of brush.

"There it goes," he said. "You can come out now—unless you're still afraid!"

The taunt stung. With a malevolent oath Jacobo came. Bulking black among the shadows, he plowed forward like an angered bull, head low. Leaving his rifle, disregarding Pierce's surrendered revolver, keeping his own hand-gun holstered, he advanced, gripping his knife, which glinted evilly in the starlight. At the same moment his peons emerged from their coverts, closing in with long bare blades raised, yet moving with watchful caution.

"Afraid, hah?" snarled Jacobo. "*Por Dios*, now you shall show us who is afraid, you—"

He belched a flood of obscene epithets. Pierce, hands behind him, listened with mouth tight, feeling Doe and Paco turn at his back to watch the threatening peons. Nobody had yet seen his gun, nor the one Doe retained, nor even Paco's blade. Back to back, facing three ways, they seemed defensive but virtually helpless.

"Meaning what?" Pierce cut in on the

foul tirade. "What do you mean to do?"

In Jacobo's black visage the eyes and teeth shone maliciously, in his black hand the knife quivered like the darting tongue of a serpent.

"To you, you—" another vile name—"I mean to show that nobody lives long enough to laugh at Jacobo Dominguez! To you I pay back all the hurts you have done me, and many more! *Cra*, when the river knows what you earned yourself by tricking me, no man will try again! These two others—fools, dogs of mine—shall live longer, to show me the rest of this thing you have found and then to labor for me under the whip! Under the whip—*si*—naked in the sun—the skin torn off their backs—Ha! But you—"

Foaming, he lunged forward, knife low.



INSTANTLY Pierce side-stepped and fired.

So close was the bulky body that the steel muzzle almost touched it. The weapon kicked back violently, its powder gas partly choked in the barrel. The report was but a hard thump. The plunging torso lurched aside, twisted on its legs, crashed down headlong into brittle brush.

"Ha!" rasped Doe. And his gun licked out at the nearest peon.

Stunned by the incredible shooting of their chief, the laborers stood a second, agape. From Doe's revolver sounded two dull clicks, then a thundering report. One old cartridge had proven good. One peon collapsed. Another, stricken by Paco's knife, screamed and fell writhing.

Then, with hoarse shouts of mingled rage and fear, the two remaining machete-men swung their poised blades. At them sprang Doe and Paco, dodging, parrying, striking. More clicks sounded, but no more shots. The Funes revolver was dead. Doe used it as a club.

Pierce, watching Jacobo, flashed one glance at his mates, saw them grappling

with antagonists, found no others in sight, and turned again to the fallen chief. Jacobo, struggling clumsily, gasping thickly, seemed trying to rise or draw his belt-gun; his eyes, fixed on his enemy, glared utter hate. Abruptly he crumpled to the ground, gasped once more, was still. Pierce wheeled to the others.

All were down. But now Doe lurched up, leaving a mauled shape with a shattered skull; and Paco broke loose from the death-grip of another. Somehow the knife-fighter had lost his deadly weapon in close combat and had finished his fight bare-handed. Now, winded, he rested a moment on hands and knees, still eyeing his strangled foe. That moment brought doom.

Close beside him lay the man he had stabbed at the first onset; the man who still writhed weakly. Of a sudden that struggling shape heaved itself to its haunches, poised a second with hands in air, fell forward on Paco's broad back. From Paco broke a startled groan. He sprawled on his face.

Pierce, springing to him, yanked away the body above him—a body which no longer struggled. Seizing Paco's shoulders, he halted, staring down. In the bare brown back was a knife, sunk to the hilt. Paco's own knife, accidentally grasped by his own expiring victim, driven home with the last strength of revenge. Killed by a dead man!

Paco coughed, twitched, made a feeble sound. Brown eyes, already dull, rolled heavily up at him. Words came, weak, gasping, never quite finished:

"El mano—el mano de Fu—"

A shudder, and he lay dead.

"The hand of Funes," repeated Doe, in a half whisper. "Perhaps—"

The two stared at each other; looked around at the clutter of dead, then into the somber gloom beyond.

"Come on!" blurted Pierce.

With abrupt haste they loaded the boxes into the canoe, shoved it outward, jumped aboard. And with hard strokes

they drove it far out into midstream. There Pierce slacked up, but Doe still paddled fast.

"Away across!" he panted.

"But—here's the current. We're going down-river—"

"We are not! Push that paddle!"

When the grip of the down-current loosed, Doe let the vessel drift.

"It's like this," he explained, gesturing southward. "Up yonder, not far, is Brazil. And the big Rio Negro, flowing to Manaos and the Amazon.

"I know all that region like a book. Nobody in Brazil cares what we did on this side of the line. Whereas if we stay in Venezuela—well, we've made a hell of a mess here. Self-defense, sure. But how to prove it? This thing would follow us down the Orinoco somehow. Anyway, I'm for Brazil!"

The blond man frowned, pondering. His companion's incisive assertions made sense. Yet his own stubborn urge was to go out as he had come in, looking all Orinoco men in the face, not dodging over a frontier to evade them. Thinking it over, he absently eyed the treasure boxes. Doe noted the frown, and misunderstood. Dryly he added:

"Maybe I'd better come clean with you. I faked my name a bit; it's Dolan, not Doe. But that's all there is against me. I'm not wanted by the police anywhere, north or south. Just a drifter, out of luck up home, that drifted down here into hell's back yard and couldn't get out. So you needn't be superstitious about traveling with me. Now that I've found the right kind of partner I don't intend to lose him."

Pierce's head came up; his dubious expression vanished.

"Shucks, my mind wasn't on that," he disclaimed. "And I don't care if your name's Dolan or Doughnut, or if you've robbed a bank or two. I know you're a square shooter, and—let's go!"

Paddles softly thumping in unison, the dugout swam south toward Brazil.



RISE AND FIGHT AGAIN!

By THEODORE ROSCOE

MUSHY (before the skipper of a Chilean schooner finally picked him and the others off that pancake-sized Pacific island) was a cricket sort of a boy, two sizes thinner than his castaway jacket and Lighthouse Mission pants; with defeated blue eyes that had never seen a Christmas tree, chin scared back in his face, gangle-wristed hands of a meekness that should have inherited the earth, yet remained unprotesting in a heritage of knuckle-thumps and dish-pans. Certainly no other lad was as buffeted, booted, bossed and belayed for his eighteen years as Mushy, mess-punk and Cinderella in the galley of the S. S. *Benjamin Thursby*.

Let the stove burn cold, and behold Mushy with a fresh black eye. Let a

raisin take wings from the Old Man's salad, and Mushy was summoned to answer for the insolence of flies. The water cooler was empty; Cookie served tapioca again; Chips found a whisker in the soup; a cog broke in the steering engine; the weather soured in the channel—Mushy took the consequences.

"You, Mushy, pass that slum an' be quick about it!"

"Yessir."

"Whatcha mean, you washed this dish? Down to the galley an' fetch it back clean, or I'll give you another to remember."

"Yessir."

"Hi you, Mushy, by Gar, you t'ink you sleep all day?" (Whack!) "You

take this coffee to ze bridge quick or ze Old Man skin you alive!"

"Yessir."

Sir—to those mugs! Darting to serve their thousand and three wants. Dodging their tarry tempers and sea-going spleens. Kicked in the breeches because the ketchup turned green in the lazaret, it never occurred to Mushy to kick back. That's what mess punks were for. Black eyes were as chronic with Mushy as subservience. Heaven only knows what Claudine could have seen in such a mouse. Perhaps it was this mouse-like personality which first attracted her eye.

They met, these two, in Brest. She picked him up with all the guile of her kind, accosting him brazenly on the dark-lit Rue Cambon where it bent toward the godowns, after watchfully studying his hesitant close-to-the-wall approach and making certain those loud-mouthed police guards of the gutter ("*Ces sales chiens!*") weren't around.

She stepped from the doorway as he passed, brushed him boldly and said, "*Miaulet!*" and Mushy, turning nervously, looked into her eyes.

Mushy knew no French, and the dimness of local street lights, lateness of the hour and threatening rain had infected him with an apprehension. He had spent a wistful evening, his nose flattened against glass, watching the crew's gayety in a near-by cafe; he wanted to beat their alcoholic tempers back to the ship.

"G'wan," said Mushy, and pursued his way.

Offended not at all by this rebuff, doubtless measuring the lack of decisiveness in its author's tone, Claudine gave a shrug and moved after her man. Mushy heard her behind him and quickened his step. Claudine accelerated hers. Eventuated a stop under an arc lamp. The mess boy was plainly embarrassed.

"Quit followin' me. I got no time to play around with you."

Limited in her knowledge of English, Claudine remained unabashed. "*Ami,*" she suggested hopefully, tidying hair behind an ear, looking up at him with an expression dramatically hungry.

"Beat it," said Mushy.

She pretended hurt a little, and crossed to the other side of the street. Mushy slumped along, but an unwilling curiosity halted him, and he looked back to see where she had gone. All the vagrom Claudines of the world know that gesture. So she tagged him out of Rue Cambon, sauntered alongside in the broken-down little *parc*—and presently these two, having followed the downhill cobbles together in silence, emerged from the shadows of the godown and stood engloomed at the *Benjamin Thursby's* gangway.

Mushy was stirred. Friendship is friendship in any language, and nothing or nobody had ever offered to walk with Mushy before. And she did look lonely and hungry, even to Mushy's threadbare standards. You can see them standing there, overshadowed by the freighter's iron hull, the shine from a companion light peaking each waifish face, Mushy fidgeting lest the watch on the foc'sle head spy him, and Claudine—is it too impossible her urchin intuition had already discovered an unmined metal behind Mushy's fireless eye? She hesitated—

Fate took a hand, the way it does in France, with a shower of grimy French rain. Suddenly she was in his arms. No gentleman would have dismissed her in such a downpour.

"Come on," he told her. "The Old Man'ud gimme hell for bringin' you aboard, but I guess we got some time before she sails." Gallantly protecting with an arm, he scurried her up the gangway. "You're kind of thin," he solicited. "I guess I can find you sumpin to eat, too."

It was not until he had hustled her down the scuttle into the greasy warmth

of the galley, where the stove lids glowed cinnamon in the gloom, that he suffered full realization of this daring. A moment he stood panicky. Mushy swallowed his caution, hurried her past Cookie's door. Down the ladder to his cubby, abaft the lazaret, he felt safe enough, sneaking her into his cupboard of a room and switching on the light.

"You stay here," he gulped, "and be awful quiet. I'm goin' to find you a bite and then you gotta get off." But robbing the lazaret was a feat of such derring-do for Mushy that his fingers turned to thumbs in that dark place of vegetables and cans; his heart was bumping so noisily in his ears he failed to hear the distant clangor of chain. First thing he knew the deck was jiggling under him—*whoom!*—there was the funnel blowing for departure. Mushy burst from the dark with a can of cayenne pepper in his hand; stumbled into his cubby agast.

"Glory be! she's under way!"

Did Claudine care? She did not. With a *cocotte* nonchalance, she had appropriated Mushy's bunk and was curled up, asleep and smiling, for all the world like a kitten. Mushy blundered out backward to spend a night of heart-sinks on a lovely bed of gunny sacks in the lazaret, crossing the bridge to tomorrow. Already they were clear of the harbor, butting a head sea course for Panama, many days away. What would the Old Man say when he found her aboard? *What* would the Old Man say?

Mushy could never think of the Old Man or his sayings without starting a sweat-bead. The Old Man's name was Grimes, Cap'n Grimes, offspring—according to Cookie—of a Liverpool blast furnace and a questionable Krupp gun, born of cast iron and as set in his ways. His trouble was asthma and he had fixations. These, aside from that delusion of grandeur not uncommon in petty mortals occupying stations of power, had to do with hates. Cap'n Grimes

hated anything which resisted his authority. He hated women and cats and bad weather and stowaways.



FOUR days beyond Brest Captain Grimes stood suddenly in the hatch behind Mushy and spoke in a voice that exploded potato and paring knife from Mushy's hands. He said, "What's *that* doing aboard my ship?"

Claudine was not one to take to her heels. Sea air and meals, a happiness such as she'd never experienced, had restored her curves and confidence. She smiled as if to say, "*Eh, bien*, big shot, you've found us out; what are you going to do about it?"

But Mushy did not smile. Anxious-eyed, he hunted the Old Man's face for clemency. The face was a stove lid. Clemency wasn't there.

"Answer me, you long-eared dish wrangler—"

"It w-wasn't her fault, sir. I brung her aboard."

"You brought that—"

"Aw, please, Cap'n sir, wait," Mushy begged. "I was just givin' her a little bite to eat—then all the sudden we're standing out to sea—"

"Just a little bite, eh? Do you think this line provides handouts for every starving wharf-rat that comes yowling down the pier?"

"But she ain't a wharf-rat, sir. An' she don't take up much room. I—I'd kind of hoped she could stay. To Panama, I mean. She can sleep on my bunk, an' I only been givin' her part of my food, sir—" He gulped in desperation, "You can see she's real nice looking, sir. I—I call her Claudine—"

"Claudine?" the Old Man roared. "Claudine, by God! Now pipe this, you lubberly slum-slinger, and don't ever forget what I'm telling you. I hate cats. There's never been a cat on any ship under my command and there's never going to be. Cats bring me bad luck.

Their fur gets in my eyes. Cats give me hay fever. Cats give me asthma. I don't like them anyway!" Cap'n Grimes's voice had risen, drawing him up with it on his toes. His face contorted, bunched at the cheeks, mustache awry, nose wrinkled, eyes squeezed shut—*Kiachow!*—he sneezed.

"Tie a poker around that cat's neck," he yelled, "and drop her overside! If I get asthma from this, I'll half kill you! Throw that cat overboard, you hear?"

Mushy was witch-broomed to his feet on the captain's boot-toe. He swallowed a lump. "Yessir."



HERETOFORE the mandates, exactions and whims of Cap'n Grimes had been commandments followed by Mushy in spirit as well as letter. He was afraid of that usurious Gascon, Cookie. Afraid of Big George Kopopolous, Dutchy McGinnity, Nick and Spike and Slug—the horny-handed crew. He was afraid of Chips, Sparks, the Mexican firemen and the mates. But Mushy's daymare, his *bête noir*, hippogrif, personal bugaboo and raw-head-and-bloody-bones was Cap'n Grimes. His knock-kneed journeys to the bridge—his tray-laden struggles to enter, serve and escape the officers' mess without offense, would have broken the heart of Uncle Tom.

"I'll skin you alive!"—"I'll just about half kill you!"—How many times had Mushy fled those hyperbolic promises of homicide, the Old Man's favorite threat; fled them with the fear of the Lord on his head, believing. Defy an order and incur the thunderbolts of this sea-going Odin? The mere suggestion sent mice feet down Mushy's spine. When the captain had gone, he sat collapsed before Claudine with misery in his eye. Carry her aft and drop her over the taffrail like potato peelings? Push her through a hawse-pipe and not look? Or dare the lightning from the bridge—

Claudine circled, and looked up at him. Claudine scraped against his leg. "Prrou?" said Claudine.

Mushy wrestled, then. It must have been something like Buddha's battle with Conscience under the *bo* tree. True, Claudine was there to spur Mushy on, whereas Buddha, they say, met the foe without rooters, single-handed. But Mushy's antagonist was Fear, and Buddha had nothing to lose. Conscience was a pretty flimsy adversary compared to Cap'n Grimes, one hunnert an' eighty pounds of blood and iron, realizable in the immediate offing. Nobody had threatened to "just about half kill" Buddha.

He emerged, pale and sweating, winner of that wrestling match. An empty paint locker in the *Benjamin Thursby's* forepeak finally decided him. He threw the poker overboard, and kept the cat.

Thus the opening gun in a rebellion, a revolt that was to make of Mushy the man they thought at least a commodore when, weeks later, he was picked up off a pancake-sized Pacific island.

"Here you, punk!"—that night at dinner—"Did you throw that cat overboard like I said?"

"Yessir."

"And if I ever catch you with a cat aboard my vessel again—"

"Nossir."

Shin-banging aft with the water crawling on his face, he managed an hour's dishwashing without arousing Cookie's ire, was dismissed with only the usual buffet, and dived on his secret mission into the bowels of the ship. There was a can of condensed milk to be palmed. The engine-room hatch to be spied on, scouted and skirted. A bulkhead to be negotiated. An underground railroad of twisting, tunneling, bilge-dark lower passages, Stygian alleys and creepy companions to be run, ending at breathless last in the cavernous forepeak, a mine-shaft of iron gloom thick with the amalgam smells of tar, rope and oil in the

thunderous nose of the vessel.

There Claudine was loosed from the unused paint locker, a candle boldly lit, milk and pocketed tidbits consumed. A nightly routine was established. She permitted him to comb her with a fork and brush her with a scouring brush. Affection grew in her eyes; she buzzed, marching across his shoulders, rubbing the back of his neck. She went so far as to let him fit her a lifebelt fashioned of cork and canvas and bits of string.

Sometimes she rolled on her back. Sometimes she hunted along a pile of old timbers, crouching, leaping at shadows, lashing her tail in pretended ferocity, her eyes going like witchshine in the black. He taught her, one evening, how to fetch and carry, sending her on errands after a ball of twine. After that she brought him everything; bits of tarpaulin, rubbish, all manner of gifts. She wouldn't sit up and beg—that was beneath her dignity—but she purred and petted and admired him, and mostly she listened. And for the first time in his life Mushy had a confidant.

He needed one that voyage, for the weather to Panama was irascible. The Old Man's kicks and bootings went up in frequency as the glass went down. Mushy told Claudine about it. He told her about his shabby, scullery-serf existence, about the slave-drivings of Cookie, the pinchings and slappings of Big George Kopopulous, the time he saved so hard to buy a sou'wester and Slug snatched it and wouldn't give it back. Together they vilified the captain. And the night before Panama, there was Mushy openly threatening the gods.

"Some day, I—some day I'll *show* him!"

That from Mushy. Mushy, who had never dared boo to a goose.

"Yes, I will, Claudine. Some day I'll *show* him—"



HE had meant to put her off in Panama, but he didn't. For two days, while the vessel stood by loading cryptic boxes labeled "Cheese Dreams" Mushy was mourning the thought of separation.

"I don't know where we're bound," he clenched out finally, "but you ain't staying behind."

So Claudine was aboard when the *Benjamin Thursby* waddled heavy-laden out of Panama, down the limitless Pacific and into the sunlit middle of that fateful noon. They were somewhere under the Equator's belt, the Marquesas their nearest landfall, the immortal ghost of Melville hovering around in the heat, and Captain Grimes enjoying asthma.

His stertorous gulplings, pantings, crimson-jowled gasps and chest-whistlings could be heard from foc'sle head to jackstaff. When the Old Man puffed down the afterdeck in this condition, the crew touched a forelock at his shadow and ducked for cover. The shadow fell on the bent head of Mushy, framed in the galley scuttle. Mushy, a bucket of onions between his knees and a butcher knife in hand, eyed the shade in dreary apprehension.

The thunderclap came. "Are you the blinkety-blank fool who left the butter on my—" it began; then it broke to a cannonade roar. "Why, blow me down to the Horn! So now I know why I got this attack—pheweeeee—and why that contaminated cook come whining we're short on tinned milk—you, you mess punk! Lie to me—wheeee—lie to *me!*"

Through the colossus-spread legs of the shadow Mushy stared in horror and saw Claudine! Not only aboard, but in evidence. Tired with confinement to a paint locker, Claudine had found an egress, climbed a number of ladders and was now engaged in exploring a jungle of ropes, tackle and canvas atop a hatch not a grab away. To Mushy's greater

despair, she came squirming through a thicket of wire cable, arched her back to scratch it on a low-hung boom and then sauntered into full view, where she started boxing at a dangling rope with a questioning paw.

Captain Grimes made sounds of strangling. "That cat—"

"Run!" Mushy screeched.

Instead of running, Claudine came trotting pertly with a wisp of engine-room waste in her mouth to see this fun. The Old Man's boot caught Mushy promptly; slammed him humpty dumpty among the onions. Claudine made a nervous sidewise skitter, but a hand like a bunch of bananas fell, snatched her pedaling to the sky.

Mushy wailed. "You ain't going to throw her overside, sir?"

"No?" The Old Man roared, shook Claudine under Mushy's nose. "No, *I* ain't going to jettison her; *you* are! You're going to take that there butcher knife and slit this mangy alley tramp's throat. Right in front of me, to make sure! Then you're gonna heave the carcass as far to sea as those arms of yours can throw—"

Captain Grimes seemed to swell. His neck bulged out of his collar like a cobra's hood. His eyes gobbled Mushy alive the way the eyes of a hamadryad swallowed the will of a peewee. It was a dreadful moment for Mushy. His first bath of shrapnel, so to speak, and the first isn't easy for the bravest.

The respite was nicely timed. Boots stampeding up the afterdeck. A yell that came splintering through the sunshine.

"Cap'n Grimes! Cap'n Grimes!"

Cat at arm's length, the Old Man whirled. The first mate was there with eyes the size of alarm bells. He touched his hat.

"Cap'n Grimes! The ship's on fire, sir!"



HIMSELF, telling this part of the story, Mushy revels in a welter of superlatives. Cap'n Grimes dropped Claudine and "ran faster than if the devil was after him." The crew came up from below "quicker'n bats outa hell." A clock-tick later you couldn't see daylight for the smoke; it all happened "sooner than you could spit to le'ward, the Old Man gettin' in the best lifeboat, of course—that's th' starboard one with a gas engine in it—and the crew pilin' overside scareder than monkeys—" The cheese-dream cargo being aerial bombs.

About his own part in this spectacle Mushy goes vague. Claudine was a blurred streak going down a hatch. Mushy fell down the galley scuttle. He never remembered how he reached his cubby behind the lazaret, where the smoke was piling up in great saffron ropes. He "packed up all my belongin's in a big polka-dot bandanna like a tramp's" and got topside "by the hair on my teeth." Tears were smearing down his cheeks and he was wailing, "Claudine's gone! I want my cat! Come, kitty—Here, kitty!" in a voice of heartbreak, when one of the mates kicked him overboard and he landed in the front end of the Old Man's lifeboat. "You know," asks Mushy, "how an old maid will run from a burning building with a pair of drawers or a ten-cent alarm clock in her hand?" Aghast, Mushy discovered he clutched in his fist that big onion-peeling galley knife. He tucked it under his jacket, afraid to throw it away.

The boats were barely away when the *Benjamin Thursby's* foredeck went skyward in a sound of calamity and "flew like a flock of crows across th' sun!" Bam—flash—geyser—and the ship wasn't there. Two lifeboats alone on the sea. It was sort of—according to Mushy—awe-inspiring. Even Old Man Grimes was pretty impressed. He hardly said a word.

The captain's boat and the first mate's

boat presently became separated. At dusk the First's boat drifted beyond the horizon and so on out of the story. To the gentler reader I'd like to report it as rescued by a Royal Dutch tanker, but I'm certain its direction was wrong and the First and his men are sailing out there yet, the smallboat rotting in its ribs and the men all dried as figs. The sea makes no compromise with sensibilities.

The captain's boat put-putted SW by W. The long waves put her up and set her down; brine broke in colored fragments under her bows; there was a faint smell of courage and gasoline, both soon to be dissipated. The men, ten in number, yawned and sat. The Old Man struck an attitude in the stern sheets, elbow on tiller, eyes defiant. And Mushy tried to make himself small as possible up there in the fore-sheets. His smudged face snuffled and quieted down with a couple of gasps; as nobody paid him a dime's worth of attention, he curled up around his polka-dot bundle and fell asleep.

A good thing Mushy caught plenty of sleep those first few days; the hour was not long in coming when he was going to need it. It was presaged by a lion-loud bellow from the Old Man on discovering—lifeboat inspections being such as they are—that the foodbox was inadequately stored. There remained but a box of biscuit and two cans of salmon apiece.

It came, Mushy's hour, when sardonic resignation of the men had blossomed into headcolds and grudgery; when the thwarts of the lifeboat had proved harder on the seat than a fellow had a right to expect; when it was found there was only one oar; when the engine ran out of gas and the oar was rigged for a sail.

It came when the water was going low, the smallboat becalmed in the awful monotony of vast Pacific emptiness, ten men and Mushy out of food. Drinking water nursing them alive and sane

made it worse. They ate the last of the biscuit and hunted the bottomboards for crumbs. They tightened their belts. Then they gnawed their belts. They hunted and found no seaweed. Then they chewed their gnawed belts. Ten men, sunbaked and salted, split-lipped and bloody-eyed, yowling with hunger. Every sailor, says Mushy, resembled a herring dried with the eyes in, and Cap'n Grimes, more terrible than ever, like a shark drying up in the sun.

The sun slammed down like a furnace door. Inexhaustible regiments of brine marched by. The men were skeletons bowed in misery, their movements dejected as the gestures of flies in glue. The lifeboat slopped along in the silence of mirage. Mushy's moment arrived when this silence was cracked by an astonishing sound from the fore-sheets.

"Marrrrrrrow!"

Everybody jumped, and no man higher than Mushy. Mushy's polka-dot bundle jumped, too. Before the frog-popped eyes of the crew, that bundle turned a somersault in the sunshine, and while the crew glared amazement at this athletic caper, it sprouted a head.

Mushy howled at the miracle in dismay. "Claudine!"

Her whiskers were out like electricity, ears flat. Rage and suspicion flamed from her jaundiced eye. If her glare held no hatred for Mushy, it did protest three weeks in the cramped, dark steerage of a polkadot bandana. That the salmon chunks and mouthfuls of water had come from Mushy's share—that her hero had risked his all on those midnights when he undid her feet and allowed her a stretch in the bow, Claudine did not understand. Where is the lady who appreciates a gag? Somehow she had chewed the handkerchief muzzle from her teeth; and the cat—or at least her head—was out of the bag!

"Well, by Gawd, Mushy," the captain congratulated with a roar," by the loaves

and fishes, if the little punk ain't saved us all!"

"Yay!" Ten sailors bared ten sets of teeth.

"No!" screamed Mushy, snatching his bundle and facing those jubilant grins. "You ain't going to do it! I saved her—she's mine—I—I taught her how to fetch and c-carry an' everything—an'—an' you ain't going to eat Claudine!"

It was Nick, crouching with grabbing hands, who fell backwards over a thwart. "Look out—the kid's got a knife!"

"And the first guy who lays a hand on her gets cut," Mushy was sobbing. "You can't do it, I tell you. You ain't going to eat Claudine—"



THERE was Declaration of Independence and revolution all breaking at once, with the captain's, "Give us that cat, you blinkety-blank punk!" and Mushy's unequivocal, "I won't!" echoed by a hoarse miaow from Claudine and a blasphemous oratorio from the crew. Mushy, in the lifeboat's narrow bow, shoulders scrunched, thin knees pulled, hugging that cat-in-a-bag against his ribs the way a little girl hugs a doll; face gone to eyes and cheek-bones under a Bolshevik thicket of hair; in his grimy fist that galley butcher knife!

"First guy who p-puts a hand on her, I—I'll stab!"

The hot gleam of the blade ricochets into the febrile eyeballs of ten devil masks—ten coconut-hairy, tight-skinned, famished devil masks that stare and choke and cough and curse and fulminate and threaten, each eyeball catching the gleam of Mushy's knife and stabbing it back at him magnified.

"Listen, punk, drop that knife! Drop it, or by the good Jumping Josephine we'll kick you over to the sharks—"

"S'help me God, Mushy, as I'm master of this vessel, I'll kill you with my own fists if you don't hand over that cat—"

"Now wait a minute, Mushy," a voice of guile, "you was always a pal of Chips and me. You ain't gonna let your pals starve?"

"Nossir, Sparks, you move another inch at me an' I'll let you have it. You ain't gonna eat Claudine—"

"Get him, boys! Get the punk and that cat—"

The astonishment, fury and consternation of the crew after that first assault and repulse, Mushy slashing the sunlight with his blade, gaffing Chips' index finger and shaving a slice of corned beef from Big George's jaw must have been something to behold. No less scenic the Light Brigade charge and Moscow retreat of the skipper, thundering forward with the intentions of a challenged bull, thundering backward with an acrobatic that all but foundered the dinghy, a streak of scarlet from wrist to elbow.

"Cripes, he's actually trying' to kill us—"

"He's gone daffy as hell!"

"Beat his bloody block off!"

"Where's th' boathook? Geez, it's in th' bow behind him!"

"An' he's been *feedin'* her! Feedin' that cat while we starve!"

"Murder him!" that was the Old Man balanced amidships, clutching his arm.

"Bust in his head. Throw something!" But where, in the bleak vicinity, was something to throw? Baying, snarling, the enraged men hunted their dungaree pockets for missiles. Belts had been spat overboard. The boat, itself, was barren. "Throw anything! Yer shoes!"

They did throw their shoes. Whizzing through the sunblast like projectiles. Big Bertha shells from the feet of Nick and Slug and Dutchy. *Zip! Zing!* And Mushy rocking, twisting, dancing, dodging, barricaded behind his new-found spirit of liberty, his slatted body shielding the morsel of Claudine, played target to such a bombardment as could only

come from the unkempt extremities of a tramp ship's crew.

When the barrage was finally lifted, all ammunition exhausted, a quarter-mile crescent of footwear bobbed far in the lifeboat's wake. The crew stood in feet as bare and baffled as their stomachs. Mushy still held the fore-sheets. Claudine was yet intact.

The day wore on. There were raiding parties, charges, forays, each more savage than previous assault. There were ultimatums, pleadings, promises, Phillipics, sensational proposals for a truce, a diplomatic mission from the stern sheets, yelled by the Old Man in wheedling supplication. "Now, Mushy, you be reasonable an' give us the cat and we'll forget everything you done—" Moans from Big George, sucking a cut thumb. "Heave th' knife overside, kid, an' we'll call it square. You c'n have yer cat."

"You ain't going to eat Claudine!"

Mushy, the scarecrow, the pipstem—solid as Gibraltar, entrenched like the Hindenburg Line. They couldn't get at him. The bow of a lifeboat is admirably strategic; there could be no rear guard actions or ambush enfilades. Frontal assault remained the enemy's sole tactic; then they must clamber the thwarts to get forward, the mast stood in the way, room for but two at a time; in the end there was Mushy and the butcher knife. First come, first served.



"DON'T you come within a foot o' me! Don't you *dare*!"

Big George and Slug were going to leap overboard, swim off the bow and get Mushy from behind. A shadowy fin skating the surface off the smallboat's quarter frustrated that intent. Mushy laughed and pointed.

"Yah! Y'see this knife? You try to rush me again, an' I'll stab it through th' bottomboards, I will, an' sink th' lot of you to th' sharks—"

"Mushy," the Old Man roared, "this is mutiny! If only I had my gun—"

Mushy shook his head wearily, and stood with his back to a flaming wall of Pacific sunset, meanfully waving his knife. His heart went down with that sun, but a great jungle of stars swarmed the sky and the moon rolled out like a Hallowe'en pumpkin to light the battlefield. Gray shadows creeping forward. Oaths. The rush. Mushy's blade fencing like a rapier in moonbeams.

"Keep back!"

"Ow!"

"He's stabbed me hand!"

"Awright, kid, but we'll get you for this! An' when we do—"

He waited. Wide-eyed, panting, the stars aslant in the firmament behind his bone-white face and pinched shoulders, moonshine on the thatch of his head. He gave proof through the night—and in the morning, cat at bosom, was still there.

Firebrand sun burned a hole through the east, and the boat grilled on an ocean of lava. Ten men barbecued with heat and hunger. Skins crusted with salt. Eyes red zeros waiting to strike. The captain, says Mushy, was a sight. He didn't steer, or watch the compass, or anything. He just stood there in the stern, wheezing, opening and shutting his fists, staring at Mushy, staring—

"You ain't going to eat Claudine!"

Mushy had no more chance of winning than the farmhands at Valley Forge. He couldn't hold out, but he did. The blockade went on. The lifeboat went on. The Pacific went on. The sailors went on. They attacked and implored, rocked the boat and bellowed, cawed, commanded, schemed. They played charades.

Chips, that noon, was dead. Of hunger, the Old Man said solemnly, and that knife-wielding punk in the fore-sheets was the murderer. All horribly convincing until Big George Kopopolous planted a corny heel by accident on the dead carpenter's face, and the corpse came to life with a roar.

Sparks was going to commit suicide. A white belly rolling in the bottle-glass

depths alongside gave stage-fright to that melodrama.

Now how many days do you think Mushy held out against ten-to-one odds and cornered his pathetic "food supplies?" How many nights do you think he could crouch, salt-eyed, over the sleeping bag where Claudine was snuggled, comforting her whiskers, feeding her the last of the water from the canteen under his seat, whispering to her through a hole among the polkadots, guarding her from the muzzles of those ravenous sea-dogs? One? Two? Men have held out longer in siege. Have stood longer vigils. Mushy wasn't dining on any solids, either. But his spirit was fed in a way it had never been fed before.

He stood them off. Two days? Three? Mushy can't remember, but thinks it was a thousand years. He held them at bay, says Mushy, until his eyeballs spun, his bones were bursting, his heart dried to a prune, his stomach knotted, the knife ossified in his hand. They took turns watching him to frustrate his sleep. He fooled them, sleeping with his eyes open. He propped himself up like a Civil War admiral in a daguerreotype, answering each threat amidships by a gesture at the bottom-boards with the knife. He cured and mummified, his wind-wrecked garments peeling like cerements. And Mushy might be out there holding the fore-sheets yet, if the world wasn't too small for such valiance and the island hadn't arrived.



IT WAS only a pancake and nowhere near as edible—a pancake of rocks, sand and sea-shells so flat in the Pacific the boat was out of a morning vapor, ripped open in the shadlows before a man knew what was up. Next thing Mushy knew his knife was gone in surf and he was heels over head with Claudine up a beach as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard, with ten famished mariners clawing after him across the foodless sand and yelling

like wolves. Mushy couldn't run. The ground was so queer under his feet that his legs wouldn't go. Hugging Claudine, he stood there, dripping, dazed, watching a pinwheel of Choctaws whoop around him in the sunshine, in his ears the tombstone voice of Cap'n Grimes.

"He's mine," Captain Grimes was croaking. "Don't none of you touch him before I do."

Mushy saw the Old Man coming in a queerish, bow-legged sea roll, belly rumbling like an empty keg, rags fluttering, arms wide like a wrestler's head lowered in its beard. Mushy looked behind him and saw Big George and Sparks and Dutchy and Slug.

"I'm going to kill you, Mushy," the Old Man said in a tone almost kindly. "I sure am going to kill you."

He meant it this time. The beach wheeled around in a circle of bare white rocks and there was a strange dry shouting in the sunshine. The Old Man came on. A forgotten paralysis crawled up Mushy's spinal cord. The Old Man's shadow shut out the morning, and the Old Man's fist thumped down like an anchor on Mushy's head.

It seemed to Mushy's stunned vision as if Claudine remained five minutes in midair. She shot from his arms and hung. She sat on the face of Captain Grimes, tail fluffed, back arched, polka-dot bandanna attached to one foot, three feet attached to the Old Man's screeching features and digging in for speed on the ricochet. Ricochet she did, rocketing from the captain's face with some of it in her claws, hitting the sand at ten paces in a dust cloud, ears pasted, eyes slanted, off through the rocks at arrow speed.

She never so much as turned to say good-by. Whiff—she was gone. Something exploded in Mushy.

The Old Man's blow had driven him ankle deep in the sand, and he came to life like an uprooted post. Dimly he saw a web of sailors crawling, wobbling at

him, mouths filled with howls. The Old Man screamed, bouncing like a kangaroo, hands clapped to shredded jaws. Mushy cared not whether he lived or died. Hurling himself at this bogie, he struck the captain with all the fury of disillusionment and no more substance than a wind-whisked paper doll. Squalling delight, the captain waved all comers away, and knocked Mushy flat as the island. Mushy was at him again. He knocked Mushy down. Mushy was at him. He kicked the shins out from under Mushy and knocked him down. Mushy pulled himself together wearily, drearily, rushing forward with hollow fists. The Old Man knocked him down. He was up. He was down. Up. The Old Man knocked him down with a push and tramped on him a bit. He was up.

There he was, dislocated, punch-blackened, swollen, hauling his formless body and picayune fists up off the sand to throw himself again and once again at the Old Man.

A sense of the uncanny must have shadowed that barren island shore. A feel of wizardry in the sunshine. There must have been something in the air not unsimilar to the old lines—

"Fight on! Fight on!" said Sir Andrew Barton.

"Though I be wounded, I am not slain.

*I'll lay me down and bleed awhile
And then I'll rise and fight
again—"*

Mushy rose and fought again. Those who saw it—those sea-bitten, hunger-eaten castaways—stopped screaming,

rooted barefoot in the cockles to stare. Even Captain Grimes grew tired of it. Weakened as he was, shrunk as was his fist, he knew he should have felled this galley punk long ago; and here was Mushy rising from the dust like a shade in nightmare, grinning, twisting, trying to find him in focus on the horizon, tottering at him with a silent shout.

The Old Man closed his hands on Mushy's stem of a throat, dug his thumbs in Mushy's windpipe, and stood. The crew gathered round, a silent little accident crowd to see the end. But what they saw was the stare of Captain Grimes go pop-eyed in his face, a sudden fixed gaze directed at something down the beach behind their heads; saw his fingers drop from Mushy's throat, his jaws unhinge in an amazed and jubilant shout.

"Haaay!"

Mushy heard that shout and opened his eyes. Against a background of sea and blond sand Captain Grimes was on tiptoe, staring. His face cracked into a remarkable smile; his hand fell comradely on Mushy's shoulder. After all, the captain was a fair man.

"Well, go ahead and hit *me*, kid! By Christmas, if you ain't entitled to it. Hit me, by damn! If you ain't gone and saved the day, after all—"

Mushy hit him. With everything he had left. Which was enough. Then, in a daze of cheering, he turned to see what was coming up the beach. What was coming up the beach was Claudine. Head up. Paws marching. Tail to the sky.

Claudine, with a fine plump seabird in her mouth.





A CASE FOR CORONER JASE

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

“**B**Y GOSH! It's good to see you up an' around agin, Camillo!” said Burr MacShane, as the four sourdoughs seated themselves at a table in the Bon Ton Restaurant, on Little Tamarack, in the early evening of a short December day. “How you feelin'?”

“Never felt better in my life,” replied Camillo Bill. “If it warn't fer that long scar on my belly, I'd never know I'd be'n sick. That's what comes of good doctorin' an' good nursin'. Ain't that so, sister?” he smiled up into the face of the waitress who was busily distributing knives, forks, and spoons.

“I'll say it is!” agreed the girl, returning the smile. “We sure caught you just in time. If that appendix had ruptured you'd have been a goner.”

Moosehide Charlie picked up a fork and balanced it on the blade of his knife.

“You know,” he said, “I didn't have much faith in Jase Quill fer a doctor, mostly because he never done it much. I found out he kin hit like hell, though. I had a sore jaw fer a week. He told me it was that there chloryform that knocked me out, but I know better. He asked Miss Lenna, here, a lot of questions that I didn't figger a doctor would ask. So, when he begun wagglin' that big razor of his'n over Camillo's bare belly, an' Camillo asleep, I jest couldn't stand it. I retch out an' grabbed his arm—an' the next thing I know'd they had Camillo all sewed up. It don't look like chloryform would work that quick. An' why would it make a man's jaw sore?”

Lenna Kinkaid, nurse by vocation and waitress in the Bon Ton by force of circumstances, chuckled: “Don't you go belittlin' Jase Quill's part in that case!”

If you'd interfered with that operation there'd been a different story to tell—but Camillo would never have heard it. It was Jase's quick thinkin' an' quick actin' an' his iron nerves, that saved Camillo's life."

"Yeah," grinned Moosehide, "an' his iron fist damn near cost me mine. I've spoke my piece. I wouldn't try to stop him agin if he was cuttin' a man in two! At that, I don't hold no hard feelin's. It was the only thing he could do, an' I'm damn glad he done it. Here he comes, now—him an' Swiftwater Bill. Don't let on I know he lied about that chlory-form."

"Hello, Jase!" greeted Old Beetles. "Hello, Swiftwater! Come on, draw up yer chairs. We'll git supper an' start a stud game. How's the storm comin'?"

"She's owly as hell outside," reported Swiftwater Bill, as the two advanced to the table, stamping their feet and beating the snow from their clothing. "Puts me in mind of the night Camillo Bill had his operation. How you feelin', Camillo?"

"Fine! We was jest talkin' about that night. Hadn't be'n fer Jase an' Miss Lenna, I wouldn't be here now."

"You shore wouldn't," agreed Jase Quill, drawing up his chair. "But, most of the credick fer that job belongs to Miss Lenna. Hell, if she hadn't be'n right there to tell me what to do, chances is I'd of cut off the wrong gut er somethin'. I didn't claim to be no surgeon. It jest goes to show a man can't never tell what he is till he tries. Next time there won't be nothin' to it. Ain't none of you boys got the bellyache? I fetched along my satchel—book, razor, an' all—jest in case."

"Yeah," scoffed the nurse, "but don't go holdin' yourself up as a surgeon yet! Next time you prob'ly won't have all the luck in the world!"

"Luck! By cripes, young woman, I'll have you to know there wasn't no luck about it! You knowd which gut it was

an' I went in there an' got it! An' the next case'll go even better'n that one. I know where the appendix lays, now—an' I know all about the ileum an' the cecum—an' how long a cut to make an' where to make it. So, with you there to help with the tyin' off an' the sewin' up, we couldn't help but do a good job. There ain't no kind of a case I wouldn't tackle, now—if you was there to kind of help out, tellin' me where the parts lays that we're after an' the like of that. You bet! Jest you name the part that's got to come out an' tell me where it's at. I'll git it—er know the reason why!"



"THAT reminds me," said Swiftwater Bill, "that me an' Jase found a corpse comin' down the crick."

"How in hell could a corpse be comin' down a crick in the winter time?" demanded Old Bettles. "He could float down in the summer, but—"

"Cripes!" exclaimed Jase, "It was us comin' down the crick—not the corpse. He was jest layin' there."

"Who was it?" queried BurrMacShane.

"He wasn't no one we knowd," replied Swiftwater. "Looked like some *chechako*."

"Did you fetch him along?"

"No. We didn't have no sled er toboggan."

"Was he froze?" asked Bettles.

"Not solid," replied Swiftwater. "Jest crusted over, like. We thought of draggin' him down by his muffler an' belt; but what with the ice kind of rough most of the way an' the snow hard-packed, we figured he'd wear out before he got here."

"Did you leave him layin' there?" asked Moosehide. "If you did, the wolves er some one's dogs'll have him et by mornin'."

"No—"

"What do you s'pose he died of?" interrupted Bettles.

"We couldn't tell nothin' about it,"

replied Jase. "He was layin' there on his back on a smooth strip of overflow ice. We tripped over him in the dark an' fell down. We started cussin' him out, thinkin' it was jest some drunk obstructin' the trail, but when we seen he was dead we quit. It wasn't fer above Steve McNally's cabin, so we drug him to there. Steve, he wasn't to home, so we h'isted him up onto the meat cache, till some other time. It was snowin'—an' the wind was blowin' so bad we couldn't light no matches to look him over."

Old Bettles chuckled: "Steve, he's down to the Caribou dancin' with them girls, an' lappin' him up quite a snootful. I'd like to be there when he climbs up to git him a bilin' of moose meat an' finds that dead *chechako*!"

"At that, though," said Burr MacShane, thoughtfully, "we'd ort to have some kind of organization up here on Little Tamarack."

"What do you mean—organization?" queried Moosehide.

"Well—like now. Here's a corpse found, an' there ain't nothin' we kin do about it without goin' clean back to the big river an' reportin' it to the police."

"We kin bury it," suggested Camillo Bill. "That's about all you kin do with any corpse."

"Yeah—but s'pose this party was murdered? The police is so busy down on the river that they can't git around to these out-cricks only onct a year er so. What we need is some one with the authority to do somethin' about it—like a cor'ner to tell what he died of; an' some one like a mayor, or somethin', that's got the authority to call a miner's meetin'; an' a constable to arrest the murderer, so we could go ahead an' hang him."

"Burr's right," agreed Old Bettles, dean of the sourdoughs. "Lots of things comes up on a crick that had ort to be 'tended to—an' the way it is, there ain't no one to do it. What's everybody's

business is nobody's business, as the Good Book says. This here camp needs a bridge. It's all right in the winter when the crick's froze, but take it before the freeze-up an' us fellas that live on t'other side of the crick is put to a hell of a lot of trouble gittin' acrost."

"Slim Peters claims he's goin' to build a foot-bridge, come spring, an' charge a quarter to go acrost."

"That's all right," approved Moosehide, "but who's got a quarter? There ain't no more'n a hundred of 'em in camp. The way it would be, the one that wanted to cross wouldn't have none of 'em. An' it would be a hell of a lot of bother to wait while Slim weighed out a quarter's worth of dust out of yer sack, 'specially if you was in a hurry an' there was a lot of you. Besides, Slim ain't got no scales."

"Sleepy Sam'll ferry a man acrost fer a drink a ferry," reminded Jase.

"Yeah," objected MacShane, "but that ain't so good. Sam's always so drunk by noon that he can't climb into his canoe; besides, the damn thing's always draw'd up on this side where the saloons is."

"That's right," agreed Bettles, "an' the crick water's damn cold, even in summer. Time a man wades acrost up to his belly, his teeth's chatterin', an' he's got to set around all the rest of the night in wet pants. Playin' stud all night in wet pants is a discomfort. An' besides, take it late in the fall, a man's liable to ketch cold. Of course, it's better'n no stud at all, but what I claim, stud should be played with dry pants."

"Yeah," acquiesced Swiftwater Bill, "Bettles is right. An' if a man pulls off his pants to wade the crick, that ain't so good. There's quite a few wimmin on the crick, an' more will ondoubtless come in the spring. What I claim, pullin' off pants right in the middle of camp had ort to be put a stop to."

"No one but a damn *chechako* would do sech a trick," opined Bettles.

"Shore not," conceded Swiftwater. "They're the ones that's got to be lawed against."

"That's right," agreed Moosehide. "We want to keep Little Tamarack decent. We ort to hold a 'lection; then we could 'tend to all them things. Here, it ain't only two days before Chris'mas, an' a storm on. All the boys'll be in camp, er nearly all of 'em. It's the best time we'll ever git to hold a 'lection. We'd ort to have a mayor—an'—"

"A couple of councilmen, one from each side of the crick," supplied Bettles, "an' a treasurer, a constable, an' a cor'ner to set on dead folks—"

"Set on 'em!" exclaimed Jase Quill, "Hell, if they're dead they'll stay there without no one sittin' on 'em!"

"Meanin' to call a jury to see if they was murdered er not," explained Burr MacShane, "so the mayor could call a miners' meetin' if they was. Besides, if we was organized we could assess every one an ounce apiece an' build a public footbridge; then every one could cross free."

"Shore we could!" concurred Bettles, "an' we could pass some laws, run Little Tamarack like a reg'lar town."

"That's the idee!" exclaimed Moosehide. "We'll hold this here 'lection to-night!"

"Better make it Chris'mas day," advised Bettles. "That's day after tomorrow an' all the boys will be in off their claims. We don't want no one to be able to claim we railroaded nothin' through."

"How about that corpse on Steve McNally's cache?" asked Camillo. "Hadn't we better go up an' git it?"

"What the hell would we want of it till after Chris'mas?" demanded Bettles. "What with playin' stud an' holdin' the 'lection an' gittin' drunk, like we will, we'll be too damn busy to fool with no corpse. It kin wait. We ain't got no cor'ner yet, nohow."

"What if Steve goes home an' climbs

up to his meat cache lookin' for grub?"

"He won't be goin' home till after Chris'mas, with the start he's got—prob'ly not till after New Year's. But if he does, he'll come bustin' back to tell us about it."

"I'll say he will," grinned Swiftwater Bill. "Me an' Jase didn't want him mon-keyin' with 'it, so we laid it so Steve would be lookin' it right square in the eyes the minute he stuck his face over the floor of the cache—an' no more'n a foot away. Steve, he'll jest let go all holts—an' hit the ground a-runnin'!"



ADJOURNMENT was taken at the close of the meal to the Aurora Borealis Saloon, which was the hang-out of the sourdoughs; within an hour notices of the forthcoming election were posted in the trading post, the restaurant and both saloons, in the flourishingly ornate handwriting of Hank Weed's bartender, a former school teacher of Munsey, Indiana:

VOTE THE STRAIGHT SOUR-DOUGH TICKET!

For Mayor Old Bettles
For Councilman, East Side of
Creek Camillo Bill
For Councilman, West Side of
Creek Moosehide Charlie
For Constable Swiftwater Bill
For Treasurer.....Burr MacShane
For Coroner.....Dr. Jase Quill

Each and every one of the above candidates, excepting Dr. Quill, has lived in the Yukon for years, and knows the needs and requirements of a good camp. Dr. Quill is a chechako, but being the only doctor in camp, has the endorsement of the sourdoughs for the office of Coroner. Vote the above ticket straight and you vote for men who know how to run a camp. We promise a free public footbridge, also a set of laws that will suit every one except crooks, thieves, murderers and claim-jumpers. Election called for Christmas Day, Dec. 25th,

1899. Polls open from 9 A. M. to 4 P. M., in the trading post. Judges of election: For the sourdoughs, Sandy McDonald, Prop., The Bon Ton Restaurant. For the chechakos: Dr. Jase Quill.

By order of the election committee,

HANK WEED, Prop, The Aurora
Borealis

SANDY McDONALD, Prop, The
Bon Ton.

Upon appearance of the notice the *chechakos*, who for the most part foregathered in the Caribou Saloon, spent most of the following day in wrangling among themselves for acceptable candidates, with the result that when election day dawned they had agreed on no regular ticket. It seemed that every *chechako* on Little Tamarack wanted to run for office, the only semblance of agreement being that they would support one Alex Snohr for mayor and Jase Quill for coroner. All of which news the sourdoughs received with quiet grins at their game of stud.

Having no opposition on the ticket, Jase Quill had been accepted without question by the *chechakos* to serve with Sandy McDonald as a judge of election. And just before time for the polls to open, he cashed out of the stud game and walked over to the trading post to discharge his civic obligation.

The arrangements for balloting were simple. A tea chest with a slot cut in the cover was placed upon a packing case in the center of the room. Upon the counter were pencils and paper. Each voter was instructed to write the names of his candidates, fold his ballot and drop it into the box.

Seated, one upon either side of the ballot box, were the two judges of election, who wrote down each man's name as he cast his vote. To discourage repeating or other forms of dishonesty, McDonald sat with Hank Weed's bung starter across his lap, while a pair of forty-four revolvers dangled in their holsters at Jase Quill's hips.

The sourdoughs, having voted early in a body, returned to their stud game with the assurance of the judges that they would announce the returns immediately upon tabulation of the votes. As they left the polling place, Camillo Bill called back:

"If you git through countin' up them votes before supper, we'll be over to the saloon. But if it's six o'clock er better, come to the restaurant. Miss Lenna don't like fer us to be late. It's moose stew tonight; if we ain't there on time she won't fetch us nothin' but hoofs an' ears."

The voting proceeded to its close without incident, except the attempted repeating of several drunks, who forgot that they had voted earlier in the day. They accepted the correction good-naturedly when shown their names on the list of voters, and—with one exception—apologized for their mistakes. The exception was a youth who arrived late in the afternoon and solemnly declared that he distinctly remembered having voted in the morning, but that he had been stone cold sober then. Now he was drunk. If the judges didn't believe he was drunk, he would return to the Caribou and bring witnesses to prove it. He argued that this fact entitled him to another vote, as every one who knew him always insisted that he was an entirely different person when he was drunk. Therefore, the drunkard now demanded his vote. Besides, he stated that he had forgotten how he voted and now wanted to change it.

The judges grinningly admitted that he was entitled to another vote, all right, but that he hadn't yet quite succeeded in becoming the other person—as they remembered him from the morning appearance. He readily accepted the logic of the ruling and left with the promise of returning when the metamorphosis was complete.



IT WAS nearly six when the two judges finished counting and recording the votes. Tacking a copy of the results upon the door, they left a similar copy at each saloon and hurried on to the restaurant, where the sourdoughs were busy with their moose stews.

"Hooray!" cried Jase, flourishing a memorandum above his head. "Our side win! Every man on the sourdough ticket got swep' into office, as a newspaper would say!"

"Read off the figgers!" demanded Old Bettles. "What with all the *chechakos* there is on the crick, an' them gangin' up on me by puttin' up only one candidate fer mayor, I shore never expected to git 'lected. I figgered you other boys would win, on account of so many *chechakos* runnin' fer each office. It jest goes to show that even a *chechako* has got more faith in a sourdough than what he's got in another *chechako*."

"Yeah," grinned McDonald, "it shows that one *chechako* has, anyhow. You've got Jase Quill to thank fer winnin' this election. But Jase will read off the returns while Miss Lenna is fetchin' us a bowl of stew. I'm hungrier'n if I'd done a day's work."

"You hold off with your readin' till I get back with the stews!" ordered the girl. "I'm just as much interested in the election as any one, even if I couldn't vote. I'll be back by the time you get your chairs pulled up."

As the girl returned and plumped the steaming stews down in front of the newcomers, Burr MacShane reached for the memorandum.

"Give it here, Jase," he said, "an' I'll read it off while you eat. I'm through."

Jase readily complied, and holding the paper to the light, MacShane read: "Fer mayor: Old Bettles 103; Alex Snohr 102. Fer councilman, East Side: Camillo Bill 96; twelve *chechakos* 151, highest one of 'em, 42. Fer councilman West Side: Moosehide Charlie 104; nine *chechakos*

143, highest one of 'em 55. Fer constable: Swiftwater Bill 82; twenty-two *chechakos* 165, highest one of 'em, 31. Fer treasurer, Burr MacShane 89; nineteen *chechakos* 158; highest one of 'em 36. Fer coroner: Jase Quill 231; Old Bettles 1."

"Yeah," explained Jase, pausing to blow mightily upon a forkful of steaming stew, "that one that voted fer Bettles was prob'ly some drunk that got mixed up about what Bettles was runnin' fer. There was quite a few of 'em voted. There was two hundred an' forty-seven votes cast, all told."

"Two hundred an' forty-seven," repeated Bettles. "An' you say I win a hundred an' two; to a hundred an' three? That's damn clost—but it only adds up to two hundred an' five votes. It looks like they'd all voted fer mayor."

"Yeah, they did," explained Jase, dunking a doubled slice of bread into his stew. "You see, when me an' Sandy counted up them mayor votes, it stood a hundred an' three fer you, an' a hundred an' forty-four fer this here Alex Snohr. I seen right away how that would never do. There ain't no camp wants a *chechako* for mayor when they kin a sourdough. I'm a *chechako* an' I know. I seen right away how them damn crooks that hangs out at the Catibou had ganged up on you, so I looked them ballots over agin' an' throw'd out forty-two of 'em."

"But cripes!" cried Moosehide, "you can't do that!"

"The hell I can't! I done it! I could of throw'd out a lot more of 'em—but I figgered there wasn't no use in playin' hog. Besides, it would make this here Snohr feel better if he know'd he'd give Bettles a run fer his money. You see, most of them *chechakos* ain't got no eg-gication—er they wouldn't be here. So they spelt this here Snohr's name wrong. Some of 'em couldn't even spell his front name—but mostly, the trouble was with his hind one, most of 'em writin' it

Snore, like he was asleep, er somethin'. But I wasn't asleep—an' I ketched 'em at it!"



"THAT'S right, boys," seconded McDonald. "Like Jase explained it to me—there ain't no sech party on the crick as 'Snore', spelt that way. So a vote fer him was a vote fer no one an' therefore should be throw'd out."

"Fair enough," agreed Moosehide Charlie.

"That's right," seconded Camillo Bill. "But what if this here Snohr gits suspicious an' calls fer a recount?"

"He kin call an' be damned," replied Jase. "Them votes is all burnt. I had that in mind when we dumped 'em in the stove after countin' 'em. Even if they wasn't burnt, it wouldn'd do him no good to recount 'em, except to git damn near all of his votes throw'd out. There wasn't hardly a dozen that voted fer him that had his name spelt right. I give him all the best of it, leavin' in as many of 'em as what I did."

"I can't see," grinned Swiftwater, "but what Jase was more than fair. There ain't no question but what he acted fer the good of the camp. An' bein' as I'm constable, the election will be upheld. You might pass me over them guns if yer through with 'em, Jase—jest in case. Yer own election, I see, went through hell a whoopin'. You was high man in the votin'."

"Well," deprecated Jase, "not havin' no opposition, of course I'd win."

"What I can't see," grinned Lenna Kinkaid, "is why they think they need a blacksmith for coroner?"

"Blacksmith!" exclaimed Jase, glaring at her. "Shore, I'm a blacksmith—an' a damn good doctor, too! Jest you pick out some disease—an' I don't give a damn which one it is, neither—an' go an' ketch it—an' I'll bet you two to one I kin cure you!"

"What with?" taunted the girl. "A cold

chisel, a pair of tongs an' a sledge hammer?"

"Hey, there—you two! Quit yer quarrelin'!" demanded Old Bettles. "Cripes sake! Any one would think you was mortal enemies er somethin', the way you carry on. But let any one git sick an' you pull together like a span of Missouri mules."

"Ain't you the gallant gentleman!" sniffed Lenna. "Callin' a lady a Missouri mule! You'd make a hot mayor, if the Queen of England would visit Little Tamarack!"

"Listen, sister," grinned Bettles, "we don't need no queens on this crick, outside of a deck of cards. An' if one would show up she'd have to take what she found when she got here. But we do need a set of laws. So if you'll git to work an' clean this rubbish off'n the table, we'll git at 'em. We've all put in a damn dismal Chris'mas stayin' sober, so we could think up them laws if we got 'lected. An' whilst yer doin' that, Sandy kin slip over to the Aurora Borealis an' tell Hank Weed to send us over a half a dozen quarts an' a corkscrew, an' we'll git to work. Then, we'll lock the doors so we won't be disturbed. If any one else on the crick gits hungry they kin git 'em a snack at the tradin' post."

"While you're makin' up the laws," said Lenna, "you ought to put one in against dirty talkin' in a restaurant. I don't mind hearin' a man swear, but there was a couple of damn *chechakos* in here the other night an' they got to talkin' so vile that I run 'em out with a catsup bottle. An' while you're at it, don't forget to put one in against practicin' medicine without a license," she added, as she heaped a tray with soiled dishes.

"Is that so?" snorted Jase Quill. "A license never cured a man or took out an appendix like I done with Camillo Bill. You jist give me a knife and keep yer licenses!"



THE dishes having been removed, a bottle was uncorked and placed in the center of the table; presently, pencils and paper having been procured, the duly elected officials of Little Tamarack went into session as a legislative body. The restaurant proprietor, Sandy McDonald, because of superior aptitude with a pen, was retained, at a fee of an ounce of dust to be payable out of the forthcoming treasury, to set down the laws as finally passed. He was also voted a rental of two ounces for use of the restaurant, that being considered a fair estimate of the loss he might sustain by locking the doors.

Various offenses were considered in the order of their importance, each law being the subject of much deliberation and discussion. It was well toward morning, and incidentally well toward the bottom of the sixth bottle, when McDonald read the final draft for the assembly's approval. Clearing his throat loudly, he read, in a voice only slightly thicker than usual:

"Laws of Little Tamarack.

Law 1.

An Act Entitled **HANGABLE CRIMES**. (a) Any law which is notoriously illegal to be broke, like murder, claim-jumpin', stealin' an' cache-robbin', is hereby deemed to be hangable offenses upon conviction by a duly called miners' meetin'.

(b) Skullduggery is also deemed to be hangable upon conviction by miners' meetin', it constitutin' any hangable crime that was fergot to be omitted in section (a) of this law, like card-cheatin', corpse-searchin' an' so forth.

Law 2.

An Act Entitled **DEFINITION OF ONHANGABLE CRIMES**. Onhangable

crimes is deemed to be ones which they ain't important enough fer to hang any one fer breakin' 'em. These cases is tryable before the duly elected officers of Little Tamarack without callin' no miners' meetin'; the penalty upon conviction shall be a fine at the rate of one ounce per law, or gittin' run out of camp, as we ain't got no jail, an' don't want to monkey with none.

Law 3.

An Act Entitled **CORPSE FINDIN'**.

(a) Any one findin' a corpse an' not reportin' same to some officer or duly accredited bartender shall be fined an ounce per corpse, or git run off the crick.

(b) This law don't include the corpse of nothin' but humans.

(c) Fer searchin' same upon findin' it, see Law 1, sec. (b).

Law 4.

An Act Entitled **THE NON-REMOVAL OF PANTS**. (a) Pants is hereby ordered to be kep' on durin' the hours of daylight in the business section of Little Tamarack.

(b) Fer purposes of this act, the business section shall be deemed to start at the lower end of Old Bettles's cabin an' run downstream to the leanin' birch tree jest above Burr MacShane's cabin. We expect to have a free footbridge in soon after the break-up, so keep yer pants on an' save an ounce.

(c) Any one ketched with his or her pants off within the above mentioned limits shall be deemed to have feloniously removed same, an' upon conviction thereof shall be fined an ounce a pair or git run off the crick.

(d) Nothin' in this law shall prevent the removal of pants fer any purpose whatever within the limits of any buildin', except a saloon, the tradin' post or the restaurant, such buildin's bein'

deemed public, an' all pants must be kep' on therein.

corpse-searchin' ahead of the coroner, see Law 1, sec. (b).

Law 5.

An Act Entitled **DIRTY TALKIN'**. (a) Dirty talkin' is hereby prohibited in the presence of wimmin.

(b) Any word shall be deemed dirty if, in the opinion of the officers tryin' the case, it ain't fit to be spoke in front of a woman of ordinary intelligence. Upon conviction, such offender shall be fined an ounce per dirty word or git run off the crick.

(c) No discount shall be allowed fer repeatin' any dirty word, sech repetition bein' deemed jest another dirty word an' fined as sech.

(d) A list of sech dirty words is deemed onnecessary.

(e) If he claims he didn't know a woman was around it ain't no defense.

(f) In case of a deaf woman, this law is null an' void. But sech woman must be proved deaf beyond a reasonable guess.

(g) Nothin' in this law shall be construed to interfere with, er prohibit common swearin', which is allowable no matter where yer at or who's around.

Law 6.

An Act Entitled **PAYMENT OF OFFICERS**. (a) No duly elected officer shall be paid any fixed salary. They'll have to git along with what they kin git out of it in the shape of fines an' so forth.

(b) Except that the coroner is entitled to be paid one ounce per corpse fer each an' every corpse actually set on, provided that sech corpse ain't got that much on him, or in his cache. All dust or other property actually on the corpse shall become the property of the coroner, it bein' at times a dirty job, like when the corpse ain't fresh. Fer

Law 7.

An Act Entitled **ESTATES**. (a) The estates of all parties duly hung by miners' meetin', reverts to, an' becomes the property of, the duly elected officers of Little Tamarack.

(b) In case it should turn out that this law ain't legal, it shall be in force only until sech time as the police er the public administrator kicks about it.

Law 8.

An Act Entitled **FOOTBRIDGE**. (a) Fer the purpose of buildin' a footbridge acrost the crick, the duly elected officers is hereby ordered to assess every claim owner on the crick, an' each feeder, dry gulch, draw er pup runnin' into it, one ounce, same to be payable to the treasurer within thirty days of the postin' of this law.

(b) Any one not kickin' in with their ounce within the specified time will be run off the crick.

(c) Any dust left over after buildin' the footbridge shall be divided equally between the said officers an' the public treasury—the treasury bein' considered as one officer.

Law 9.

An Act Entitled **ENFORCEMENT AN' DEFACEMENT**. (a) All the above laws is deemed to be in force from the moment of postin' a copy of same in the followin' four places, to wit: The Aurora Borealis Saloon, The Caribou Saloon, The Tradin' Post, The Bon Ton Restaurant. Said laws to be posted in a conspicuous place in each of the above mentioned buildin's.

(b) Defacin' or destroyin' sech posted copies shall be deemed a crime, an' upon

conviction, such criminal shall be fined an ounce fer each offense or git run off the crick.

(c) Spittin' on sech copy shall be deemed defacin' same.

(d) Other laws will be added as needed.

(e) Any one thinkin' up a new law should report same to the officers, who are hereby ordered to pay an ounce a law fer each one used.

Law 10.

An Act Entitled CIVICAL DUTY.

Any one refusin' to vote at a duly called election, or refusin' to serve on a coroner's jury, er refusin' to attend a duly called miners' meetin' shall be deemed to be guilty of skulduggery an' shall be hung on conviction of same. See Law 1, sec. (b).

SIGNED

Bettles, Mayor
Camillo Bill, Councilman,
east side
Moosehide Charlie, Councilman,
west side
Swiftwater Bill, Constable
Burr MacShane, Treasurer
Dr. Jason Quill, Coroner."



AS McDonald finished reading Old Bettles rose to his feet: "You've heard the laws read.

I make a motion that they be approved. Some one second the motion an' we'll take a vote on 'em."

"I'll second it," said Camillo Bill.

"All right, gents—these laws has be'n moved an' seconded. All in favor of 'em signify by sayin' 'Aye'."

The laws having been unanimously approved, Bettles turned to McDonald: "I kin hear the cook kickin' things around out in the kitchen, so you git busy an' make three more copies of them laws an' post 'em up prominent, accordin' to Law 9, sec. (a), while we git break-

fast; then we'll be gittin' ketched up with our stud."

Lenna Kinkaid appeared and, after removing the empty bottles and serving the breakfast of moose steak, fried potatoes and coffee, walked over and scanned the laws that McDonald was laboriously copying at another table.

"Huh—ten of 'em, eh?" she twitted. "Tried to be like Moses an' his ten commandments, I s'pose."

"Well," observed Moosehide, "come to think of it, Old Bettles does look like pitchers I've saw of Moses."

"Is that so?" exclaimed the oldster. "Well, accordin' to the Good Book, he was a damn sight older'n what I be. An' I don't claim our laws here is as good as them ten commandments of his'n. But at that we've got him skinned one way—ourn allows a wider range of vices than what his'n does. Come on, you fellas—throw that grub into you! I feel lucky!"

"I could use a little sleep," said Jase Quill, stretching his arms above his head with a prodigious yawn.

"Ain't that jest like a damn *che-chako*?" grumbled Bettles. "D'ruther sleep than play stud!"

"Yeah," admitted Jase, "I s'pose it is. But the facts is, we ain't goin' to do neither one. I'm cor'ner of this camp—an' I'm right now swearin' you all in fer a jury to set on that corpse me an' Swiftwater left on Steve McNally's cache."

"Hell," growled Moosehide, "it looks like we'd done work enough fer one day! Let him wait."

"Nope," replied Jase, "he's be'n waitin' quite a while a'ready. It's askin' too much of even a corpse to keep him waitin' ferever up on a meat cache. Me an' Swiftwater found him an' we'll go an' git him. You boys go on over to the Aurora Borealis an' we'll fetch him down there. Most likely we kin git it over with before a crowd collects. Most of the boys'll be sleepin' off their Chris-

mas hangover. We'll be back in an hour if we have good luck." He turned to Lenna, who was piling the soiled dishes on a tray: "You're in on this, too, sister," he said. "You might come in handy on a case like this."

"You can't make a woman serve on any kind of a jury!" exclaimed the girl. "Who ever heard of a woman on a coroner's jury?"

"Any one that hears about this one will," replied Jase, dryly. "Jest you step over there an' read Law 10 an' see if you kin find anythin' in it about wimmin not servin'. An' then shift yer gaze up to Law 1, sec. (b), an' see what might happen to any one that runs foul of the skullduggery law. There can't no one fool with the law on Little Tamarack—not even Old Bettles hisself!"

"Guess he's right, sister," grinned Bettles. "An' you might be quite a help to us, at that. There ain't none of us that delights in hangin' wimmin as sech—but a law's a law, you know."

Jase and Swiftwater arrived in due time with the body, which was removed from the toboggan and deposited on the floor.

"You'll have to kind of help me out a little," said Jase, turning to Bettles. "I ain't never run no inquisish before."

"All right. The first thing is to pronounce him dead. In you're opinion, is this man dead?"

"Why shore he's dead! Any damn fool would know a man couldn't be froze stiff fer half a week an' not be dead."

"The next thing—who is he?"

"How the hell do I know? I never seen him before. Mebbe when we search him we'll find some letters on him, er papers er somethin'."

Several drowsy individuals who had spent the night in chairs slouched over, eyed the dead man apathetically and returned to their chairs. Hank Weed, proprietor of the saloon, stepped around the end of the bar and stared down into the marble-white face.

"He's a *chechako* name of Harvey Breen," he stated. "Had him a claim way up the crick somewheres. First man to kick out on Little Tamarack, eh? We'll fix him up a slab an' put that on it; then if we ever git to be a big camp like Dawson he'll be quite a fella—kind of historical like."

"Next thing," said Bettles, "is what did he die of? That's your job, Jase. You're the cor'ner."

Jase eyed the corpse dubiously. "Cripes! I don't know! I didn't even know he was sick! It's accordin' to what he had—like the heart disease er the fits—it even might of be'n the appendicitis, like Camillo had, only this fella couldn't git to me quick enough. Camillo was lucky."

"I'll say he was!" sniffed Lenna Kin-kaid. "Go ahead an' examine him. If you can't tell what killed him, you'll have to post him."

"I'll have to—which?"

"Shore!" agreed Old Bettles. "That's what cor'ners does—hold a post mortorium."

Jase regarded the dead man with disfavor.

"I guess I'll have to git my book," he said. "It's down to the restaurant in my satchel. 'The Family Physician An' Household Remedies Fer Man An' Beast, To Which Is Appended a Hundred Good Receipts Fer The Housewife' is the name of it, an' it's got all them things in it a doctor's got to know."



"YOU better leave that damn book where it is," snapped Lenna, "or you'll be shearin' him like a sheep! If you can't find out anything from a superficial examination, you'll just have to go in there and find out."

"In—where?"

"Why, in the man, of course! You'll have to dissect him!"

"You mean—take him apart?"

"Shore," replied Bettles, "an' if you

find out his heart is busted, er his brains, er any of them main guts, then the chances is that's what he died of."

"Yeah, but how'm goin' to do that—an' him froze hard as a bone? Hold on! I've got it! Load him back on the toboggan, boys! We'll drag him over to the restaurant. I'll borry McDonald's meat saw an' saw him in sections, cross-ways; then we kin onthaw him a little to a time in McDonald's oven an' I kin look him over careful."

"Not by a damn sight!" cried Swift-water Bill and Burr MacShane in unison. "We eat there!"

"Well, hell—so do I!" replied Jase. "I kin tell the cook to try an' keep him separate from the other meat in the oven till he gits onthawed. It won't take long, nohow."

"We'll thaw him out right here," declared Old Bettles. "We kin stand him up in the corner behind the stove. If we left him lay on the floor it would take too long, what with the cold air rushin' in every time some one opens the door. Then when he gits soft you kin whittle on him with yer knife till you come acrost what ailed him."



LENNA KINKAID, who had dropped to one knee beside the body, suddenly looked up.

"Turn him over!" she ordered.

The body was turned on its face and the girl's fingers deftly explored the occipital region.

"Here's the trouble," she announced presently. "A bad fracture right over the base of the brain. You say you found him on smooth ice? Well, here's what happened—his feet shot out from under him when he hit that ice an' he came down on the back of his head. He certainly came down hard. Feel, here, how the bone is crushed. There's even a sliver sticking out through the scalp."

Squatting down beside her, Jase ex-

plored the region thoroughly with his fingers.

"That's right," he agreed; "it's smashed up bad."

"All right," said Bettles; "make out a report of accidental death an' we'll all sign it, then we'll carry him out in the woodshed an' set some one to diggin' a grave. It'll take a couple of days er more to burn in. Then we'll fix up a slab, like Hank said, an' put on it how he was the first man to die on Little Tamarack. That way his name will go down to prosperity, jest the same as if he'd amounted to somethin'. Better search him, first, Jase, an' see if you can't git yer fee off'n him. A corpse should ort to pay his own way, if he kin."

As Bettles talked, Jase worked the sliver from the skull with his fingers, examined it carefully and, prying open the back of his huge silver watch, thrust the sliver inside and closed the case.

"Nope," he said, "I ain't goin' to make out no report of accidental death till I've give this case more thought. It might be a murder."

A storm of protest and derision left Jase unperturbed.

"You kin talk all you want to," he said, eyeing them calmly, "but I'm the cor'ner an' you ain't a damn thing but the jury. It's me that's got to make out the report before you kin sign it. Well—I ain't makin' out none till I git damn good an' ready."

"But, Jase," argued Old Bettles, "hell's fire, yer delayin' the stud game! An' what's more, Miss Lenna, here—she claims it was a accidental death. An' she'd ort to know. She's a nurse, ain't she? She's had experience."

"Yeah," admitted Jase, "she's a nurse. But she ain't no cor'ner—an never will be. This party's dead. How much experience has she had nursin' dead men?"

"I'll prob'ly have plenty," snorted the girl, "if you're goin' to practice medicine on the crick. I'm goin' back to

the restaurant. When you get your report made out, bring it over an' I'll sign it."



AS she left the saloon Jase turned to Swiftwater Bill: "Ketch holt of his other side an' we'll git him stood up in the corner an' start to onthaw him. I want to examine him some more. Besides, I can't git my hands in his pockets, stiff as he is, without cuttin' 'em—an' a man wouldn't like he should git buried with his pants all cut to hell. We kin git quite a little stud played while he's thawin'."

The body was propped upright in the corner behind the stove, and after a few rounds of drinks the men seated themselves at a table and began the game.

Other men drifted in, stared wide-eyed at the dead man, and questioned Hank Weed, who explained that the body had been found somewhere up the creek, that the coroner suspected murder, and that he was thawing the body out so he could proceed with his examination. Most of these men left hurriedly, without stopping for a drink.

At the end of an hour Weed called out: "Hey, Jase—Harvey's saggin'! I built up a fire in the back room. Why can't you take him in there? Dead men standin' around a saloon thataway raises hell with trade. There's be'n fifty er more come in an' took a look at him, but they didn't buy no drinks—an' the Caribou's gittin' all my business."

The partially-thawed body was removed to the back room, where Jase busied himself for an hour while the others resumed their game. Pausing at the bar before rejoining them, Jase tossed off a drink.

"I'm through with him, now," he said. "Should we stick him in the woodshed till the boys gits the grave dug?"

"No, he'd be in the road. Every one would be stumblin' over him there in the dark when they went to fetch an

armful of wood. Leave him where he's at. That fire'll go out d'reckly an' he'll freeze up agin. I don't use that room fer nothin' but storin' a couple of bar'ls licker in—an' he won't bother them none. By the way, I found this on the back bar a few minutes ago. Looks like some one must of stepped around the end of the bar an' laid it there when I was busy. Trade's picked up sence we got Harvey out. It ain't be'n there long, because it was leanin' up agin some glasses that I jest put there a little while ago."

Jase took the envelope upon which his name had been scrawled with a lead pencil, tore it open and; after reading the brief communication he thrust it into his pocket without comment and returned to the game.

"Did you find anythin' on him?" asked Bettles.

"Nothin' but a jackknife an' the stub of a lead pencil."

"I didn't think you would," opined Swiftwater Bill. "When we was fetchin' him down here I could see no bulge on him like a dust sack would make."

"What," queried Jase, tilting the corner of his hole card for a glance at the pip, "would a man be comin' to a Christmas jamboree with empty pockets for?"

"That's right!" exclaimed Moosehide, "Do you think he was murdered an' robbed?"

"I'm ponderin'," replied Jase noncommittally, tossing his hand into the discards.

Two hours later he paused in the middle of a deal and glanced across the table at Old Bettles:

"We're goin' to call another 'lection," he stated abruptly.

"Another 'lection! What the hell do we want with another 'lection? We was lucky to win the one we had!"

"We didn't 'lect no clerk," replied Jase. "There's a lot of work fer a clerk—like McDonald copyin' them laws. An' me makin' out reports. Hirin' it done a lit-

tle to a time will run into money."

"Well, cripes!" exclaimed Bettles. "I'm mayor—I'll app'int a clerk, if that's what's ailin' you."

"Nope. It wouldn't be legal. He's got to be 'lected, same as the rest of us. The boys won't be goin' back to their claims till after New Year's. They're makin' a week of it. We'll pull off another 'lection tomorrow. You're the mayor—you've got to call it. We'll put up Sandy here agin' Alex Snohr, both of which writes a good fist."

"Hell, I don't want the job!" cried McDonald. "I got all I kin 'tend to runnin' the restaurant."

"You'll run, jest the same," retorted Jase. "It's a civical dooty an' a personal favor to me, besides bein' a necessary step in the onravelin' of a crime."

"Cripes! You don't think me or Snohr killed him, do you?"

"I wouldn't hardly recommend a man fer publick office which I thought he was a murderer, would I? Deal me out fer a few hands an' I'll hunt up Snohr an' git him to run agin you. You kin resign if you git 'lected."

"Snohr prob'ly won't run," commented Camillo Bill. "I heard how he was claimin' there was some shenanigan about him gittin' beat fer mayor."

"I'll tell him different," said Jase, rising from the table.

"He'd prob'ly beat me anyhow," argued McDonald, "what with all the *chechakos* votin' fer him."

"I hope they do," replied Jase enigmatically. "There won't be no votes throw'd out fer spellin' this time. I'll be back d'reckly," he called as he passed from the room.

"What's ailin' him—gone batty er somethin'?" queried Bettles.

"Look's like the cor'ner's job has kind of went to his head," ventured Burr MacShane.

"I ain't so sure about that," opined Camillo Bill. "I wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't somethin' millin' around in the back of his head."

"Kerosene would git most of 'em," grinned Bettles and only McDonald refrained from the general laughter.

"Jase ain't no man's fool," he said. "Don't fergit, it was his quick thinkin' that put you in fer mayor when we was countin' them votes. If you take my advice, we'll do like he says."



"WHAT luck did you have?" asked Bettles, as Jase resumed his seat in the game an hour later.

"He'll run. I posted notices callin' the 'lection fer tomorrow an' signed your name to 'em as mayor. First off, Snohr was kind of hostile—like he figgered it was somehow my fault he worn't 'lected. But I told him how it was because he didn't git votes enough. I told him that the promise of a vote ain't a vote in the box, not by a damn sight—an' how he never wants to believe what any one says about how he votes. A voter kin lie like hell, I remind him. An' I promised him that to make shore there ain't no crooked work, we'll let him an' Sandy count the votes. An' what's more, I promised him we'd count 'em as they was voted. It's the only fair way, at that—then you kin see how each one voted an' find out if he lied. I promised him I'd stand right there, call off each vote as it was turned in, then pass it to him an' Sandy for 'em to count. We won't need no ballot box. An' I promised him that in case Sandy was 'lected, I'd try an' git him to resign. Facts is, I promised him damn near everything except the tradin' post—but he's goin' to run an' that's the main thing." Jase turned to Swiftwater Bill: "An' I want you should be there, as constable, with a gun on you. This here 'lection is important as hell."

The voting the following day was desultory in the extreme during the forenoon. Little Tamarack had just held one election; the novelty had worn off. At noon, when Jase reported that only

fifty-one ballots had been cast, the mayor and the two councilmen made the rounds, calling attention of all and sundry to Law 10, with the result that the postprandial rush of voters nearly swamped the polls. Men crowded into the trading room, laboriously wrote the name of their candidate, pushed and jostled each other in an effort to hand in their ballots and hurry back to the saloons.

But Jase Quill was not to be hurried. Standing directly in front of the two candidates, he accepted each ballot, bawled out the name written thereon and passed it on to the candidates for inspection and tally.

When the crowd had thinned somewhat, he accepted a ballot from a man and read the name thereon: "Alex Snohr!" Then, turning abruptly upon Swiftwater Bill, who had made himself comfortable as possible upon a near-by keg of spikes, he ordered: "Arrest that man for the murder of Harvey Breen!"

Instantly the room was in confusion. As Swiftwater rose from the nail keg the man made a dash for the door and, finding the way blocked, whirled, a six-gun in his hand, just as Jase Quill, roaring, launched himself toward him. The gun barked once as the man went down beneath two hundred and twenty pounds of outraged bone and muscle. The next moment Swiftwater Bill had wrenched the six-gun out of his hand. Eager hands produced rope and the man's arms were bound securely behind him as Jase eagerly scrutinized the pistol and slipped it beneath his own shirt.

"Gawd, yer shot in the neck!" cried a horrified voice, as Jase turned sideways.

"It's his ear!" exclaimed another. "The bottom part of it's gone! That's blood from his ear runnin' down his neck!"

Raising his hand, Jase fumbled gingerly at the injured member with thumb and finger. "'Tain't nothin' but the flap," he announced. "It don't hurt the

hearin' none. Cripes, that pistol roared like a cannon! He helt a little too fer to one side."

"Better git somethin' on it," suggested a man. "Yer bleedin' like a stuck hog. Here's a handkerchief."

"How the hell kin you tie up an ear?" demanded Jase. "Let 'er bleed. I'll sew 'er up when I git time. We got to call a miners' meetin'."

"You mean—you kin sew up yer own ear?" asked the man, a vast respect showing in his eyes.

"Cripes, yes!" replied Jase. "I'm a doctor, I am! I could run a seam acrost the back of my neck, if I wanted to. Besides, yer damn handkerchief's prob'ly p'izen with germs. Don't never fool with a germ! Anyways, that flap was jest one more damn thing to git cold. I'm glad I'm shet of it!"

The voice of Sandy McDonald broke a momentary silence: "Election's over! I concede defeat! Alex has got me a hundred an' twenty-nine to sixty-four an' I quit!"

"All right," Jase replied. "You fellers rustle around, now, an' tell every one you see that we're holdin' a miners' meetin' in the Aurora Borealis Saloon. Me an' Swiftwater will take the prisoner over there an' Alex, you're the clerk, now—you fetch along a pencil an' paper, 'cause there might be some clerkin' to hangin' this buzzard."

A few minutes later the advent of Jase and Swiftwater Bill, escorting the prisoner between them, broke up the stud game in the Aurora Borealis.

"Git set, boys!" bellowed Jase. "We've got a hangin' to do!"

"But cripes!" exclaimed Bettles. "We can't hang no one without tryin' him first! We got to call a miners' meetin'!"

"It's called a'ready," replied Jase. "They'll be pilin' in here d'reckly. McDonald an' some of the boys is roundin' 'em up."

"But—what about the 'lection?"

"That's all over. Snohr win. He had

Sandy one twenty-nine to sixty-four an' Sandy give up. Here comes Snohr now with his pencil an' paper. I didn't know if there's any clerkin' to do er not. You're the mayor. You've got to run the meetin'."

"Shore. But have you got any evidence? An' what the hell ails yer ear?"

"This damn cuss shot the bottom off'n it when I was helpin' Swiftwater arrest him. An' you don't need to worry none about the evidence. That's my job."



THE saloon was rapidly filling. When the big room was jammed to capacity, Old Bettles ranged the prisoner before him, and rapped on the bar for order.

"Miners' meetin' called fer to try this here, to wit, Jack Sanderson fer the murder of one Harvey Breen. Said Breen's corpse bein' found dead by Swiftwater Bill an' Jase Quill a couple of days before Chris'mas, layin' on the ice of the crick, a little ways above Steve McNally's shack. They drug said corpse down an' h'isted it up on Steve's meat cache, not havin' no sled or toboggan to fetch it into camp on.

"Yesterday mornin' they went back an' fetched it down here an' the cor'ner helt an inquest. He dooly pronounced Breen dead an' figgered he was murdered by some person er persons onknown. To-day he caused the arrest of this here Sanderson an' will now try to prove the murder onto him. As in case of miners' meetin's, you-all constitute the jury. Yer dooty is to listen to the evidence an' then vote fer acquittal er conviction as the case may be. The murder, if any, must be proved beyond a reasonable guess, an' the prisoner is entitled to all the breaks he kin git, if any.

"The fact that he shot part of the ear off'n the cor'ner whilst resistin' arrest can't be considered primo facial evidence that he murdered Harvey Breen, though it may be considered in helpin' you make up yer minds what kind of a louse would

pack a belly-gun around fer to peck at cor'ners er other publick officials with. He was a pore shot, er Jase wouldn't be here now.

"The cor'ner will now be swore in an' give the chanct to prove his case. After which the prisoner will be give his chanct to try to wiggle out, if possible. Meanwhile I'm requestin' Hank Weed to send his barkeep over to the tradin' post fer a twenty-foot len'th of good stout rope. An' tell him to holler to them diggers to make that grave wide enough fer two. I now call Jase Quill, cor'ner of Little Tamarack to step up an' be swore!"

Jase, a gory figure, with blood still dripping slowly from his ear to his shirt collar, stepped into the small cleared space before the bar and raised his right hand.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the hull truth, er whatever you claim to be the truth, s'elp'e God?" demanded the mayor.

"Shore."

"All right—go ahead."

"First off," said Jase, "I want you should swear in Miss Lenna Kinkaid. She was on the cor'ner's jury an' was the first one to locate Harvey's trouble. Here she comes, now. I sent Swiftwater Bill over to the restaurant to fetch her."

Swiftwater, with the girl in tow, forced a lane through the crowd and Bettles swore her in.

"What's the matter with your ear?" she cried, glancing toward Jase, who had stepped aside.

"Some of it got shot off," replied the man, "but it was a part I didn't have no use fer. We want you should tell this miners' meetin' what you found out about Harvey's hard luck."

"Well, you laid him there on the floor an' were talkin' about postin' him. I thought maybe I could find out what killed him without goin' to all that trouble, so I began feelin' of his head to see if I could locate any bullet hole, or contusion, or fracture that might have

caused his death. I found a very bad fracture of the occipital bone—the bone bein' crushed so badly I could feel a sliver stickin' out through the scalp."

"In your opinion," asked Bettles, "would this busted bone have caused the death of a reasonable man?"

"Certainly it would! No man could live with his head crushed like his was."

"How do you figger it got busted?"

"Well, from what Jase an' Swiftwater said about findin' him on a place where the ice was slick, I figure his feet went out from under him an' he came down on the back of his head. He was a tall man an' quite heavy. I think the fall could have done it."

"Course it could!" cried the prisoner, who was immediately silenced by Bettles pounding on the bar with his fist.

"You shet yer damn mouth an' keep it shet till yer told to open it! If you wasn't about to git hung I'd fine you a round of drinks fer contemp' of court. Yer damn lucky to git out of it!"



HE turned to the coroner: "All right, Jase—go ahead. But it looks to me like you done yer case more harm than good by callin' Miss Lenna. Couple more witnesses like her an' the boys'll be turnin' the damn skunk loose on the murder. Course we'd still try him on the ear-shootin'. That constitutes skullduggery; we'll keep it fer an ace in the hole."

"We won't need that ear-shootin' case," replied Jase, confidently. "Facts is, I'll jest spot him that chunk of ear. If he kin wiggle out of this here murder I'll swear the ear jest sloughed off, er a mouse et it whilst we was waitin' fer voters. Like you said, he's entitled to all the breaks he kin git—an' he's shore goin' to need 'em from now on."

"But to git back to the murder. You that was on the jury seen me stoop down, after we'd flopped Harvey over here on the floor, an' claw around that busted place in his head, jest like she done. Then you seen me raise up with that sliver she

told about that had worked through his hide an' examine it, didn't you?"

"Yeah, we seen that."

"All right—what did I do with the sliver?"

"You stuck it in the back of yer watch."

"Right again—an' here it is." Opening the watch, he extracted a small, brownish sliver and laid it on the bar. "We'll call this sliver Exhibit A."

Thrusting his hand beneath his shirt, he withdrew a six-gun which he held in his hand. "I want Swiftwater Bill swore in to testify if this here revolver is, er ain't, the one he took off'n the prisoner at the time of his arrest."

Swiftwater, being duly sworn, testified that the gun was the same he had wrenched from the prisoner's hand while Jase held him down, stating that he was positive because he had noticed a certain battered screw-head where the gun had at some time been taken apart.

"We'll call the gun Exhibit B," said Jase, placing it upon the bar beside the sliver. "Now I'll call Harvey. Bein' dead, he'll have to be fetched in out of the back room. It was good an' cold last night so he'll be refroze, but it wouldn't make no difference. I skun his head all around that cracked place an' pinned back the flaps so you kin see it. Three, four of you boys go git him. You kin lay him here on the bar alongside this other stuff—but lay him on his belly so the wound will show. We'll call Harvey Exhibit C."

The body having been deposited on the bar, Jase pointed to the fracture plainly visible on the bare skull.

"It's like this," he explained, "the minute I felt of that busted place I know'd damn well it wasn't never made with nothin' flat—like fallin' down on the ice. I know'd he'd be'n fetched a hell of a wallop with somethin' kind of roundish like. I worked the sliver loose an' examined it careful."

"I don't claim to be no detective, gents."

But I am a doctor. As such, I know'd damn well that even a *chechako's* head wouldn't be made partly of walnut. This here sliver ain't bone—it's walnut wood. An' I figgered that way up here on Little Tamarack the only walnut wood would be on a gun of some kind, so I kep' it. Then, when Harvey onthawed, I skun back his hide an' seen how the busted place was jest the shape of the butt end of a heavy revolver. Then I know'd that some one had snuck up behind him an' smashed him so damn hard with a gun butt that this sliver split off'n it an' stuck in one of them cracks in the bone. Likewise I know'd that all I had to do was find the man that owned the gun that this sliver fits on the butt of." He paused; picking up pistol and sliver, he demonstrated before the crowd that the sliver fitted perfectly into a damaged place in the extreme end of the butt of the gun.

"Another thing that made me think it was a murder was the fact that when I searched his pockets I didn't find nothin' but a pencil an' a jackknife, neither of which would of got him very fer on a Chris'mas jamboree."

"But," queried Bettles, "how the hell did you locate the right party?"

"That p'int bothered me a little," admitted Jase, "ontil I give it thought. I know'd that if we started grabbin' folks off an searchin' 'em fer guns, onlest we got the right one right on the start we wouldn't never git him. He'd git scairt an' throw his gun away er cache it where we'd never find it. He might not even be carryin' the gun when we searched him, even if we grabbed him first." Pausing, he drew from his pocket an envelope from which he took a roughly penciled note. "Whilst I was busy in the back room peelin' Harvey's head, some one left this here letter on the back bar. It's got my name wrote onto it so Hank give it to me when I got through. Here's what is wrote down in the letter: 'Jase Quill, cor'ner. The talk is, that yer callin'

Harvey Breen's death a murder. Smart Ellicks like you better watch yer step er you'll git it the same as him.'

"That's what it says, an' there ain't no name signed to it. Well, I got to thinkin' about it, an' I rec'lected that when we was countin' votes in that first 'lection, one feller had spelt Alex Snohr's name E L L I C K an' that's jest the way this feller that writ the letter to me spelt it when he called me a 'smart ellick'. So I know'd if I could find the man who spelt Alex that way, I'd have the murderer. Then I figgered that if a man would vote fer Alex Snohr fer mayor, he'd vote fer him agin, no matter what he run fer—so I called another 'lection, an' persuaded Alex an' Sandy to run fer clerk—an' it come out jest like I figgered."

Old Bettles addressed the meeting: "Well, gents, you've all heard the evidence agin the prisoner, which he will now be give a chanct to—"

"Jest a minute," interrupted Jase. "I think we'd ort to search the prisoner an' see if he ain't mebbe got some other incriminatin' evidence on him."

"Hell," grinned Bettles, "we can't only hang him onct. You've got enough evidence on him now to hang a dozen men. But go ahead, Swiftwater, search him if Jase says so. This is his show—not mine."

The man's pockets yielded a jackknife, a plug of chewing tobacco and two pouches of dust, which Jase immediately seized upon and held up before the assembly:

"This here clinches the case agin the prisoner," he said. "Now we got here the reason he done it. Ain't that so?"

A strong murmur of assent ran through the crowd and Jase tossed the smaller sack to Hank Weed.

"Weigh it up!" he ordered.

"Four ounces, lackin' a couple of dollars," announced the man.

"We'll call it Exhibit F. Now, Hank, weigh up this one."

"Sixteen ounces an' a half," said Weed.

"Exhibit G," said Jase, "an' that winds up my case."

Bettles turned to the prisoner: "It's your turn now. An' believe me, brother, you better talk fast, 'cause you ain't got much time. The boys is gittin' res'less. An' it's my dooty to remind you that whatever you say will prob'ly be used agin you."

"An' make it snappy!" urged Hank Weed. "It's gittin' hot in here. I wouldn't like fer Harvey to thaw out there on the bar."

The prisoner cast one long gaze of hate over the faces of the crowd and met not a single friendly glance.

"Hang me an' be damned!" he blurted. "I'll see you all in hell! I lost my case when I missed that damn cor'ner! I'm through!"

Bettles pounded for order as an angry murmur ran through the crowd.

"You've heard both sides of the case," he announced, "an' it's up to you men. All who believes this prisoner, to wit, Jack Sanderson, is guilty of murderin' an' robbin' the said Harvey Breen, signify by sayin' 'Aye'."

A mighty chorus of "Ayes" filled the room.

"Contrary, 'No'.

The silence that followed was broken by Bettles: "Take him away, men, an' do yer dooty. Swiftwater will boss the job. That leanin' birch at the lower end of the pants limits would be a handy tree."



THE room cleared rapidly as the men crowded out through the doorway, followed by Swiftwater Bill and his prisoner. Presently only Hank Weed, Bettles, Jase Quill, Camillo Bill, and Lenna Kin-kaid were left in the room. The men lifted the body of Harvey Breen from the bar and carried it to the back room. When they returned, Weed perfunctorily wiped the bar and set out bottle and glasses.

"This un's on the house," he announced.

"Beats hell," said Bettles, as he filled his glass, "how *chechakos* dotes on hangin's. Me, I don't take no joy in one."

"Me neither," said Camillo Bill. "But how about you, Jase? You're a *chechako*—besides, if any son had come as clost to blowin' my head off as he did yourn, I believe I'd of took delight in seein' him hung, myself."

Jase shook his head:

"Bein' a doctor," he said, "I've saw a lot of men die. It ain't no fun. An' besides I wanted to collect my fee. I'm takin' Exhibit G." As he spoke he reached out and lifted the larger of the two gold sacks from the bar and dropped it into his pocket.

Old Bettles grinned. "Hey—you're entitled to the corpse's dust—not the prisoner's! How the hell do you know that's the pouch he took off'n Harvey? It might of be'n the other!"

Jase shook his head:

"No one," he announced solemnly, "would commit a murder fer a scant four ounces of dust. You've got to use yer head."

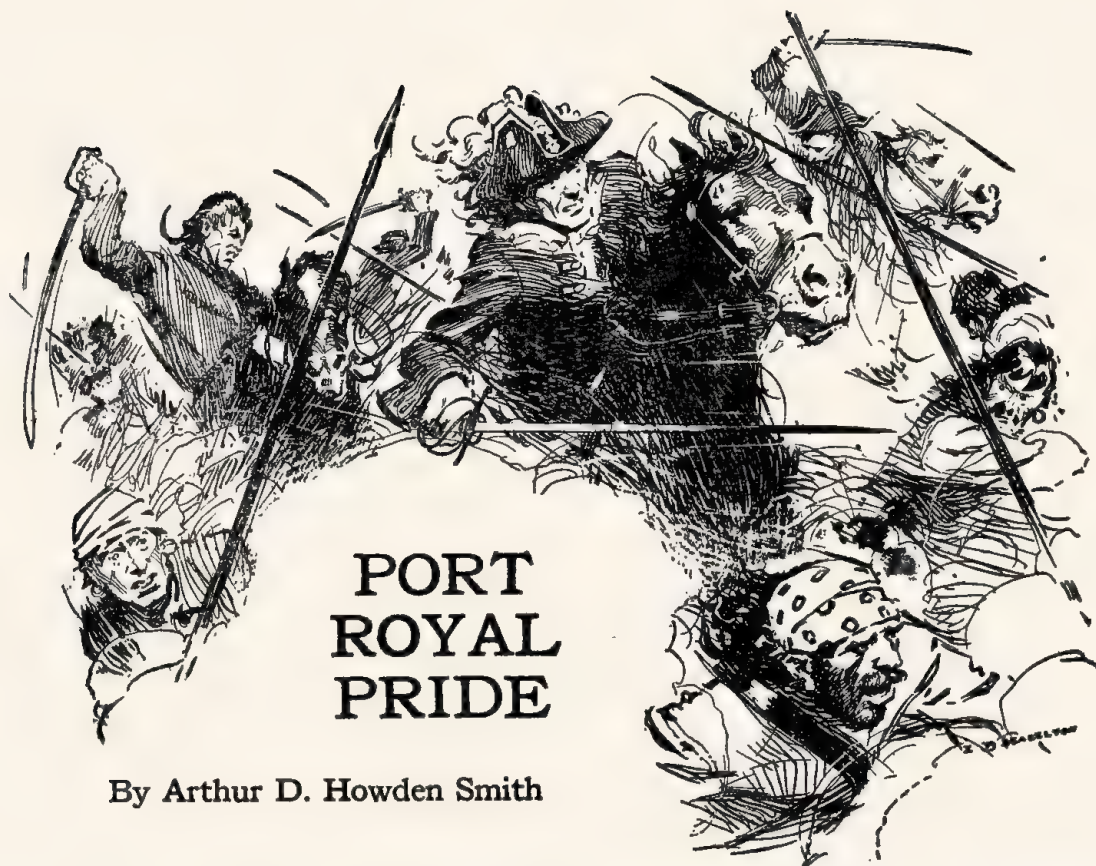
"You done a good job, Jase," admitted Hank Weed, "But, at that, it looks like sixteen ounces an' a half is damn good wages fer the time you put in."

"A doctor," retorted Jase, "ain't paid fer what he *does*; it's fer what he *knows*—an' knowledge comes high."

"Y-e-e-a-h," drawled the nurse, as she tossed off her drink at a swallow, "well, just you come along down to the restaurant. We'll dig out that old satchel of yours an' I'll fix up that ear."

As the door closed behind the two, Old Bettles refilled his glass and shoved the bottle toward Camillo Bill:

"Well," he said, "we had a pretty good Chris'mas after all, didn't we, Camillo? Drink up—er New Year's will be ketchin' us plumb sober!"



PORT ROYAL PRIDE

By Arthur D. Howden Smith

PORT ROYAL drowed in the golden light of morning. Afar in the north the Blue Mountains were a misty barrier, barely visible. Southwards, beyond the harbor, the waters of the Gulf stretched to the limit of vision, gently azure. A proud town, Port Royal: proud of its wealth and of its position as center of the Jamaica trade; proud of the fortress crowning the tip of the sandspit upon which it was built; proud of its dockyard, headquarters of England's naval power in the West Indies, where already at this hour calkers' mauls thudded on the hull of a stately three-decker looming on the ways, and the hoarse chanties of the riggers carried across the harbor to the shippers awaiting their rich cargoes of cacao and sugar and rum; proud of its churches, whose bells rang silvery-clear in the still air; proud of the handsome mansions of its merchants and the town-houses of the planters, who came in from their es-

tates to transact business with their factors and relieve the monotony of island life with epic debauches; proud of its bursting warehouses.

Oh, a proud, proud town, where even parsons drank to excess and a man might have his choice of the shapeliest octoroons imported from the Spanish islands. A town where, if you were too poor to buy land and slaves for a sugar plantation, a venture in logwood to the Belize or an unexplained cruise along the Main would put you with the most prosperous—and no questions asked, supposing you were sufficiently discreet.

So thought Long Diccon, the picaroon, a wry smile twisting his grim mouth as he drew bridle momentarily at the entrance to Albemarle Street. A lean, gaunt fellow, this Long Diccon, with an arrogant, highbeaked face and black curls falling to his shoulders and a pair of eyes as hard and gray as the Toledo blade of the rapier which slapped his

horse's flanks. He had been born Richard Paradene, of Tregormlis in Cornwall; but all through the Caribbees men called him Long Diccon. As a rule, they respected him. None despised him.

Peering up the palm-shaded vista of the narrow street, he suddenly perceived the incongruous bulk of a sedan-chair, propped against a wall, a brace of negroes sprawled beside it. His smile became a chuckle, and his grim features lightened boyishly—

"By 'r Lady," he swore to himself. "His pigship or I'm a Frenchman!" He trotted forward, and the negroes, aroused by the soft plop-plop of his nag's hoofs in the coral-dust, scrambled to their feet.

"Y'are the Admiral's boys?" he challenged them.

"Ya'as, sar," they assured him in chorus. And one added: "Admi'al done tole us await him hyah, damn our eyes."

Long Diccon's laughter was unrestrained. "Well, here's a doubloon for you. Now, get ye back to Admiralty House. No, no, do as I say. Sir Bantry will have no need of you this morning." And the negroes, dazed by the authoritative manner of this strange white man no less than by his incredible munificence, hastened to sling the straps of the chair's poles to their broad shoulders and trudged off. The picaroon watched them go, with a twinkle in his eyes. He had lost completely his hardness of manner. He was a boy on a lark.

"So," he murmured, "the little Solita has snared his pigship. A clever wench!" He leaned back, and gazed up at a window immediately overhead.

"Solita," he called. "Solita mia!" A rattle of Spanish answered him, and the jalouses were torn aside.

"Big fool," hissed an angry voice. "Cannot you see—Oh, Holy Saints, the chair! Where is the chair?"

"I sent it home," Long Diccon replied composedly. "Sir Bantry requires ex-

ercise lest that paunch gain the better of him."

A flower face bloomed in the drapped sunlight, and big, dark eyes stared down at the picaroon. "You, Diccon!" The quaintness of the accent enhanced the caress of the tone. "Oh, but why did you not tell me you were coming? Here, I have this—But psst!" A cautionary finger went to her lips as a deep voice rumbled within doors. "He is up." Then over her shoulder: "I was calling to the bearers, *amigo*, bidding them to the kitchen, but they are gone."

"Gone?" thundered the deep voice. "Damn their eyes, if those fool niggers have slipped cables I'll have 'em striped tiger-fashion."

The flower face reappeared at the window. "Go, Diccon," she commanded. "This afternoon, no? Ah, and tonight! If you had but—"

She vanished, and the picaroon touched up his horse, chuckling to himself the length of the block.



THE town was awakening. Negro slaves were sweeping out the shops, taking down the window-shutters. Clerks were busy at their desks. Teams of oxen hauled ponderous puncheons of rum and sugar to the waterfront, whence lighters would ferry them out to the ships in harbor. In King William Street, lined with the mansions of the gentry, Long Diccon checked his horse a second time. There was a bustle of preparation in front of one of the larger houses; a group of slaves, men and women, in gay calico and seersucker, surrounded another sedan-chair, but a lighter, more fragile vehicle than had served Sir Bantry Dawkins, Vice-admiral of the Red and Commander-in-Chief of the Station for the King's majesty. And while he watched, three white people emerged from the building's mahogany doorway.

A tiny pulse commenced to beat in the picaroon's temple. Forgotten were Solita and the lesser lights-o'-loves who'd

spend the evening lolling on the benches of the "Admiral Blake," "The Carib Maid," "The Jolly Sailor." Who'd take thought to a Spanish wench when Felicity Anstruther went abroad?

Long Diccon slipped from his saddle, silver spurs and rapier clanking eagerly, and his hat-plume raked the ground.

"Felicity!" he said. "I'd not expected to find you this side. 'The Twelve Mile'."

"Nor shall you, come evening," she retorted. Her smile was warm, despite brother Tom, stocky and stalwart, glowering at her elbow. "I am to open the Savannah house. Tom holds the town is no place for a young miss."

"Ay, so," growled Tom. "Y'are in from sea, Paradene?"

Long Diccon nodded absently, his gaze roving from Felicity's lovely face to the slim stripling whose arm she held.

"Oh, Lud," she exclaimed. "I forgot you two were unacquainted. This is Lieutenant Wrothesley, Diccon, fresh come from home to be Sir Bantry's aide. Captain Paradene, Reg, who is the boldest of our sea-rovers."

"Say, rather, picaroons," Tom Anstruther amended gruffly. "What hellfire mischief ha' you been about lately?"

Long Diccon regarded him with mild amusement, and hauled a string of sixty matched pearls from a pocket. "A-plenty. Saw you ever the like?"

Felicity cried out in admiration, and Long Diccon offered them for her inspection. "They're yours, if you will," he said carelessly. "Troth, I had you in mind when I took them."

"Oh, marvelous," she sighed. But Tom snatched them from her.

"Stolen goods!" he rapped. "No fit gift for my sister, Paradene. I'll thank ye to keep this for your own purposes. Ay, y'have much to answer for, if what I hear be true."

And the slim stripling, Wrothesley, echoed him: "Sir Bantry has been hearing tales of you, Captain Paradene. I

doubt not you'll have a call to Admiralty House."

Long Diccon grinned at the pair of them. "How's that, sir?" he asked. "I find his worship in residence in Albemarle Street." The naval officer blushed angrily, whilst Tom Anstruther cursed under his breath and Felicity laughed aloud. "All men pay tribute to Solita, I'm told," she said. "You, too, Diccon?" He bowed over her hand. "There is one lady to whom I pay tribute when I am allowed," he answered. "You see, I have a horse. 'Tis not far to the 'Twelve Mile'—"

But Tom Anstruther interrupted brusquely. "'Tis over-far for one who, doubtless, has an illicit cargo to dispose of. And now, if you'll permit, Paradene, my sister will take her chair. I'd have her rest through the noon sun at Dauntton's Pride, and the negroes must not be forced unduly."

Long Diccon's answering smile was smooth as velvet, but the hard glint returned to his eyes. "Y'are plain-spoken, Tom," he said, "which is permissible, seeing y'have such a sister." He let his lips linger on the hand she had yielded him. "You'll not hold me amiss, Felicity, if my tribute is withheld?" For a second, as his gray eyes lifted to her violet ones, his look was tender. "For a time," he amended gayly.

Tom Anstruther growled throatily, and Lieutenant Wrothesley's hand fluttered to his sword-hilt; but Felicity only beamed the brighter on the picaroon.

"So it be short," she assented. "Never give heed to Tom. Only give over the sea, Diccon, and buy the place by Spanish Town we spoke of last year. Sure, the Freebooters' trade nears its end. Once there is peace with the French—"

Hoofs racketed up the street, a cloud of dust eddied furiously—"Express! Express, ho! Way—in the King's name!" And a rider galloped past, scattering negroes like pebbles under his hoofs, and setting Long Diccon's mount to prance.

ing. Wrothesley stared after the rider, shading his eyes from the blinding light.

"Must be for Sir Bantry," he muttered. "By your leave, Mistress." He bowed devotedly. "See you at nooning, Tom." A nod to Long Diccon, and he hurried away—in the opposite direction. The picaroon, swinging into saddle, chuckled once more with that uncanny effect of boyishness.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Towards Albemarle Street? Tush, Tom, Admiralty House lies t'other way." Tom's answering curse was audible; his sister's trill of laughter infected the waiting blacks.

"Oh, Diccon, Diccon," she cried. "Y'are always one to belittle authority. Be done with it, lad! Here's Tom will stand your friend, despite—"

"Damned if I will," roared Tom. "Into your chair, miss! Paradene, I'll thank you to be off. There's a limit to my patience."

Long Diccon's bow was courtly. "And to mine, sir," he returned. "Give you good-day, Felicity."



AND he touched spurs to his horse, and cantered around the corner into Bristol Street. "If the fellow will ask for it, what am I to do?" he mused, drawing bridle before the warehouse of Joshua Hambidge, merchant and factor. A negro accepted custody of the horse, and he swaggered into the counting-room.

"Ho, Jos," he hailed. "Am I returned sooner than you looked for?" Joshua Hambidge, a small, bandy-legged man, with a shrewd, perky manner, came forward to greet him.

"So you be richer, Diccon, I care not," he answered. "What luck? And where is the *Sorry Jest*?" "Luck of the best." The picaroon tossed the pearls on the merchant's desk. "There's a sample, but they're not for sale. The rest? Oh, I picked the bones of a Don off Maracaibo, Genoese velvets and Venetian

stuffs. And we ran a Frenchman down in the Mona Passage, and looted him of twenty thousand *louis d'or*, besides the pearls. The *Jest* lies in Negrilos Bay, where the Governor and Sir Bantry needn't be offended by a sight of my rogues, and I ha' made arrangements for teams to haul the spoil hither tomorrow."

Hambidge wagged his head, obviously torn betwixt satisfaction and misgiving—"God love us, Diccon," he protested. "Why will you not leave the Spaniards be? With the French we are at war, but if the Governor or Sir Bantry learn whence came these Italian stuffs—I'll not be responsible. You took the one ship, d'you see? No, do not laugh. 'Tis a serious matter. The Admiral is provoked at you, I know not for what. And one more peccadillo would see you lodged in a casemate."

Long Diccon's laughter was like a ray of sunshine in the darkened counting-room. "The Admiral!" he scoffed. "His pigship! I found his chair in front of Solita's, Jos, and tipped the boys to be off with it. Wait until I pump her for his confidences. Let him lay a finger on me, and I'll make him the laughing-stock of the town. But to business! Here are the manifests. Let's tot 'em up, and see what you can reckon to do for me. And a good price, damn you, or I'll go elsewhere. There's not a merchant in Port Royal but would like the profit of the cargoes the *Jest* fetches in, be they licit or illicit."

The two heads, one bald, the other crowned with luxurious curls, were bent over the labored foolscap sheets when a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," called Hambidge. "Ah, Lieutenant Wrothesley, I trust I see you well?" The naval officer paused on the threshold, accustoming his eyes to the dim light.

"Captain Paradene?" he said. "Admiral Dawkins will ha' speech with you, sir!"

He turned to the merchant. "You know your own business," he continued stiffly, "but belike there is trouble in store for one dealing with such as this—gentleman." He paused ever so slightly before the last word.

"Why, 'strewth, sir, I've never met trouble through Captain Paradene," deprecated Hambidge.

Long Diccon rose to his full height, towering above the naval officer, and his lips quirked humorously. "An unexpected honor, Mr. Wrothesley," he said. "Am I to wait upon Sir Bantry at Solita's house?"

Young Wrothesley glared at him furiously. "At Admiralty House," he replied. "And permit me to remind you, sir, that Sir Bantry Dawkins holds the King's commission. Also, if Sir Bantry's rank and age prohibit him from noticing your insults, there are others whose swords will serve instead. Give you good-morning, Mr. Hambidge."

"What a fire-eater," deplored Long Diccon, stretching his arms. "I foresee a pleasant morning, Jos. Well, is all clear to you? My share of the gold you may invest as you see fit. For the goods I'll take your draught whenever y'have cleared 'em. Oh, and like a good fellow, send me a few pipes of wine and five hundredweight o' rum to the *Jest*—lest my rogues break ship. 'Faith, then Sir Bantry would have his hands full. 'Tis a long time since Jamaica has known the rough hands of the Brethren of the Coast. Ay, not since Morgan was governor. Which reminds me, Jos, I must make my usual pilgrimage to the old man's grave. 'Tis become a pledge of luck for me. Ah, there was one puts us all to shame! We are but babes by contrast with him."

Hambidge caught at the picaroon's arm. "Be not too trusting in your luck, Diccon," he begged. "Speak the Admiral fair. Things are not as they once were, my friend. The reins are tightened. And if we keep peace with Spain there'll be representations in London

and men like you may hang at Execution Dock. I remember, if you do not, how Morgan hung his own shipmates for proof that he'd not tolerate the old ways."

"He'd not have hung me," grinned Long Diccon. "Not whilst this rapier kept its point. Be at your ease, Jos. Sir Bantry and I shall understand one another. Only do you fudge up an addition to the Frenchman's manifest to account for the Italian stuffs. Y'arely, lad!"

Outside in the street he bade a negro lead his tired nag to stable. It was but a short walk to the dockyard, and St. George's on the way. So he cocked his hat over one eye, thrust down his rapier-hilt and strode off, taking the wall of all he met.

"'Tis Long Diccon, the picaroon," men whispered behind his back, and women stared at him, covertly or openly, as the case might be, some attracted by the huge emerald in his plume-clasp and the diamonds flashing in the creamy folds of his jabot, others admiring his reckless grace and the firm line of his jaw.



HE HAD barely passed the hedge which fronted the churchyard, and was threading a path amongst the high-built graves, when he heard footsteps under the palms, a voice calling his name. He turned to face Solita, a robe of India muslin scarce veiling her shape, her naked feet in tiny slippers of green-and-gold brocade. Her face was flushed; she was panting as she reached his side.

"Ah, Diccon, *mi corazon!* I have had a dream—such a dream."

"'Tis not uncommon," he remarked, not too agreeably. "What do you out in such a costume?"

"I have but just dreamed it, after the old pig left," she persisted. "I had to tell you, so I threw on what I could find and followed you. It was the Senor Jos who told me you came here."

"A pox on Jos," muttered Long Diccon. "He talks too much. Another time, lass."

"No, no, I must tell you, now," she persisted again. "Ah, what a dream!" she shuddered. "There was a wall of water, and you under it, and houses falling, and you beneath them."

"'Twas but a dream," he reminded her.

She shook her head. "'Twas a warning, Diccon, a sign. There is bad luck for you here. The old pig will throw you in the *calabozo*. He was so angry when he found his chair gone. Some one in the street told him 'twas you had sent away the negroes. And there are other things.

"'Damn my eyes,' he said, 'I'll lesson the fellow!' So find your horse, and go, in the Virgin's name!" He laughed, and patted her shoulder. "All in good time, *Solita mia*. What an old wife you have become!"

"But you will—you will go?" she pleaded. And more passionately: "It shall not be on my head, Diccon, if you stay. I'll bar the door to you."

"'Twill not be necessary," he assured her lightly. "Here, child—" and he unfastened one of the diamonds from his scarf. "This for your care of me. Now, get you home. I have matters to occupy me."

She accepted the jewel indifferently enough, two tears as bright trickling down her cheeks, snatched at his brown hand and dropped an airy kiss on it, then sped away as lightly as she'd come. Long Diccon shrugged whimsically.

"And they say a harlot has no soul," he murmured, and murmuring it, forgot her. His eyes had discovered what he sought; a tomb somewhat larger than its fellows, with armorial bearings showing through the tropic mold and the graven letters of an inscription:

"Here lieth ye earthly remains of Henry Morgan, Kt, sometime Lieut-Gov. for His Majesty in Jamaica, Admiral and Conqueror of Maracaibo, Porto Bello,

Panama and divers other strongholds—
Ano Doi 1635-82. Sic transit gloria mundi."

He stood for a little while, arms a-kimbo, looking down at it.

"So there you are, Sir Harry," he said thoughtfully. "Six foot of stonework will hold you, and as for the gold you had of the Dons 'tis no more use to you than the sunlight that can't reach your bones. But I'd sooner play your part, be admiral in my own right, than hoist pennant by favor of any king, Stuart or Dutchman. Wilt yield me one more run o' luck, old rascal, there in the shades? I ha' need of you. Another voyage, and I'll put my fortune to the touch, win all, lose all. At worst, she'll say no." He laughed constrainedly, as at a quip not quite to his fancy. "Pox me, 'tis a quaint conceit—a dead man for luck! But we'll see, Diccon, we'll see."

He spun on his heel abruptly, and tramped out to the street, aggressive as before, hand on hilt, boot-tops creaking faintly in rhythm with his spurs, more cavalier than picaroon. And presently, coming to the spreading mass of Admiralty House, he brushed past the sentries, chin in air, and crossed the central corridor to a room whence issued a raucous, brazen roar, as unflagging in its energy as the flailing voice of a hurricane.

"Damme, sirrah, I bade ye fetch him hither—and ye tell me he comes at his pleasure! In my time the gentlemen of the King's service knew an order for an order. But I'll lesson the scurvy knave, damn his eyes! I'll rede him respect for a Vice-admiral of the Red, the lousy, loose-living thief of a picaroon! I'll—"

Long Diccon halted in the doorway. "Give you good-morning, Admiral," he said. "You sent for me?"

Sir Bantry pushed aside the calipee of green turtle, stewed in sherry, with which he had been regaling himself, and glared at the picaroon. A short, squat

block of a man, Sir Bantry, as broad as he was long, blotchy-red of complexion, with a fiery, bulbous nose, and two sea-blue eyes as sharp as gimlets, and a fringe of white hair around his bare skull. Beside him stood Wrothesley, wriggling uncomfortably under the blast of his reproof, and in a window-seat lounged Tom Anstruther, expectant of demeanor.

"Ay, damme, I sent for ye," barked the admiral. "I ha' had in mind this many a day to lay ye by the heels, fellow, for a menace to the King's peace, no better than a pirate!"

"Tush, sir," rejoined Long Diccon. "Is 't outside the law to prey on the King's enemies? We're at war with France—"

"Not ye," scoffed Sir Bantry. "I know your tricks. Damme, within the hour I ha' heard by express your French comrades of the Brethren of the Coast ha' landed for a foray—and your ship awaiting them in Negrilos Bay!"

"'Tis news to me," Long Diccon asserted equably. "In very truth, sir, the war has broken up our ancient fellowship. The Brethren of the Coast are but a name. And for myself, I'll fight any Frenchman backs his tops'ls for me."

"So say ye," derided the Admiral. "Well, let it pass for the nonce. But what of the tale I ha' had from Master Jenkins, of the *Sally*, pink o' Bristol. He tells how ye stayed him on the high seas, and lacked him wi' ordnance 'twixt wind-an-water, boarding him thereafter and conducting yourself despitefully on his very deck."

Long Diccon laughed.

"And so would you ha' done, Sir Bantry. I'd been caught in a Carthagera breeze, beating up for three weeks against it, reckoning to water in the Dutch islands. My men were on short rations, and I hailed the fellow, asking *him could he spare us a butt or two*. But he'd ha' none o' me. So I gave him a gun, and boarded, taking what I needed

and offering him silver in payment. He refused, swearing he'd make trouble for me here."

"A likely tale," snorted Tom Anstruther.

"I ha' eighty lads aboard the *Sorry Jest* will bear witness to it."

"And if they do?" fumed Lieutenant Wrothesley. "A pack o' picaroons, if no worse!"

But the Admiral's little eyes bored into Long Diccon's, and after a moment he brushed aside the incident with a wave of the hand. "Well, no matter," he growled. "God wot, there are worse counts against ye. And I'll say naught o' the public disrespect ye cast upon me this morning. Was I a younger man, mayhap—"

"'Twould afford me pleasure, Sir Bantry, to meet any champion of your choosing," Long Diccon interrupted silkily.

"What? What?" bellowed the Admiral. "Are ye now for breaking the peace under my very eyes? Take heed, fellow, take heed, lest I clap ye in the brig. Let there be no more such talk, d'ye hear?" He gobbled a mouthful of turtle, and pushed back from the table. "But touching this matter of the French, I'll not be so easy. Ye'll hand me your sword, and give me a line to your crew bidding them submit to Wrothesley here."



THE pulse in Long Diccon's temple commenced to beat. "That may not be, Sir Bantry," he said. "And for this reason, if no other: that my men are so many pikes to your use against these same French."

"Do ye tell me so?" snarled Sir Bantry, whilst Wrothesley and Tom Anstruther laughed their comments.

"I do," Long Diccon retorted, undisturbed. "Where are the French?" And at this Tom Anstruther cast off all restraint.

"'Twixt here and the Twelve Mile Savannah," he stormed. "And my sister, for whom you profess such respect, headed straight toward 'em."

Long Diccon paled.

"And you bide here, you fool," he said slowly. Then: "Prithee, Sir Bantry, there is need for haste." His manner was suddenly earnest; all trace of mockery left his face. "You must credit me," he insisted. "I ha' no traffic with the French, and for Mistress Felicity. But we waste time talking! What will you do, Admiral?"

"Do?" said Sir Bantry. "Why, muster what force I can, and march against the scoundrels."

The picaroon shook his head. "You'll be too late. 'Tis not alone Mistress Anstruther we must think on. By the time you could bring up your foot they'd be away. Give me, rather, a troop of horse, however small. I'll harry them to their ships."

"Madness," exclaimed Tom Anstruther. And Wrothesley added: "Trust him not, Admiral. 'Tis a trap."

But again Sir Bantry's gimlet eyes bored into Long Diccon's. "What pledge ha' I ye mean well by us, sirrah?" he growled in his deep voice that could range in the wind's teeth the length of a three-decker. "I'll tell ye this: all my frigates are at sea. I ha' no means o' coming at the French by water."

Long Diccon answered straightly: "The one pledge I can give will ill commend me to Anstruther. I love his sister better than aught I ha' seen in life."

Tom Anstruther ground his teeth—"It lacked but that for insult," he growled.

And Wrothesley half-drew sword from sheath. "Insolence!" he exclaimed. "This is my quarrel, Tom."

But the Admiral motioned both to silence, his gaze unswerving on the picaroon's face. "Damme," he rumbled. "Ay, damn my eyes! I may be an old

fool, but—humph! Ye know these picaroons, fellow."

"None better, Admiral," Long Diccon urged eagerly.

"And ye tell me in honesty 'tis best to have at them a-horse?"

"Past doubt, Sir Bantry. They are unaccustomed to fighting ashore nowadays. Give them one brisk charge, and they'll run."

Sir Bantry rose from his chair. "I'll try ye, Captain," he decided, with his first show of respect. "No, no—" to the others, "be still, gentlemen! Captain, ah—"

"Paradene," interposed Long Diccon.

"Ah, yes, Captain Paradene will command. Go, the two o' ye, and raise all the gentry in town. Ye'll muster in the Bath road. Be off!"

An hour later the picaroon galloped out the Bath road at the head of a motley troop of fifty horse, planters, merchants, factors, clerks, a couple of ship's officers who could throw leg over saddle, a freedman or two. He pushed them unmercifully under the hot sun, the horses sweating heavily, and at every cross-roads they were joined by fresh recruits, so that he had upward of eighty in his tail when they reached "Daunton's Favor," where Felicity and the plantation folk were already astir, having been warned by a fugitive slave of the Frenchmen's presence several miles to the eastward.

Felicity, herself, was first to reach the picaroon's side as he drew rein in front of the house to learn the latest news of the marauders.

"Oh, brave Diccon," she cried. "You'll drive them, won't you?"

Her brother shoved out of the ranks to rasp: "Get you to your chair, girl." But she ignored him, clinging to Long Diccon's crupper, nor would she notice Wrothesley, who bustled forward with a, "By your leave, Mistress, I'll see you hence."

"The negro reports the French are

three hundred," she continued. "If any led but you I'd say they were too many, Diccon."

"Will you ha' done?" snarled Tom Anstruther whilst Long Diccon held his tongue, staring down at her hungrily.

She rounded on her brother. "Am I a chit that you'd presume to order me so?" she challenged. "No, then, I am a woman grown, and my mind is my own to form. Let be." She reached up her hand to the picaroon—"God with you, Diccon," she said. He stooped, still speechless, and met the lips she freely offered him.

"Form ranks!" His voice dominated the restless hoofs. "For'ard, trot!" Dust billowed overhead; Tom Anstruther and Wrothesley, despite themselves, were caught up in the press and carried along, cursing and protesting.

Long Diccon looked back once. Felicity was a miniature figure, one arm raised in a gesture of farewell. He set his face grimly to the front, and spurred his horse. Not two miles distant a rising pillar of smoke gave warning the *Freebooters* were busy about their bloody work.

He struck them adroitly on the verge of an open savannah, where his mounted men might have the advantage of manoeuvre. A ragged, awkward mass, the French sent a volley of shot into his ranks, bowling over a couple of men and horses, and with a din of screeches lowered pikes to withstand his charge. But the Jamaicans drove through the enemy in a compact column, wheeled and smote them again in rear, bursting their crude formation asunder, and the French, sodden with looted rum, cast weapons aside and fled for the beach. The dregs of Tortuga, they had no hankering to face those pounding hoofs and the flashing rapiers which let out a man's life in one lightning thrust. The moiety who escaped Long Diccon's rush tumbled into their waiting boats and rowed helter-skelter for the ships of the

squadron lying off-shore, which made shift to cover the retreat with an aimless discharge of great guns. And once aboard, the baffled Freebooters did not even stay to secure the boats, but loosed all sails and stood out to sea.

"Morgan's justice, Captain Paradene," a planter called jovially as the troop re-formed on the beach. Long Diccon nodded gloomily. He felt no zest in victory, nor in the memory of Felicity's lips, softly clinging. "I ha' given Morgan's justice to many men," he answered shortly. "If it please you, gentlemen, we ha' not finished our stint. Some of you should hunt for stragglers. With the rest I'll make speed back to Port Royal, and seek the Admiral's wishes. If he can recall a frigate or two, now's the time to raid Tortuga and blow the vermin out of their nest before they've recovered from our drubbing."

None gainsayed him, and after making certain details to comb the neighboring countryside, he led the troop on the return track to "Dauntton's Favor." Out of the corner of his eye he marked Tom Anstruther and Wrothesley with their heads close together. They were for trouble, those two. Well, let them do their worst. So far as he was concerned, he cared not. He'd kissed Felicity. After that life held all, or nothing. His gamble simply had come sooner than he'd anticipated that morning, standing by old Harry Morgan's grave.



"DAUNTTON'S FAVOR" was deserted, save for a few infirm slaves. The ladies, with the able-bodied negroes, in charge of overseers, had been sent inland to Spanish Town. Long Diccon tarried only to arrange for their recall, and select a squad to maintain contact with the outlying patrols, then continued for Port Royal at a steady trot which ate up the intervening miles. Alone of the company he rode singly and aloof. Behind him the ranks were gay with song and laughter. The Jamaicans had suf-

ferred no serious losses; they were satisfied with themselves, and planned to celebrate their triumph with a night of carousing. Ay, there'd be gallons of punch and sangaree gone down those dusty throats before next sun-up.

On the last rise of land overlooking Port Royal Long Diccon tightened bridle. The horses deserved a breather, and he sensed that his followers wanted to make their entry in proper style. But as if it had been a signal, Tom Anstruther and Wrothesley urged their mounts forward on either side of him.

"You'll bide wi' us," ordered Tom, his features congested with hate. And: "Ay, ay, th-that will you m-my bully," the naval officer stammered excitedly. "There's others can give the Admiral wiser counsel."

The troop swayed uneasily, and a chorus of objections buzzed from the ranks. "Fair play, my lads!" "Paradene is one against two!" "Picaroon or no, the fellow did nobly for us!" "Fair play, I say!" "Here's a blade for ye, Long Diccon!"

But Long Diccon wheeled his horse to quell them with a glance. Not once had he looked at Anstruther or Wrothesley.

"Be at your ease, gentlemen," he said. "There is a small matter betwixt us three which can best be settled privately. Prithee, ride on, and acquaint the Admiral he shall shortly have word o' me."

And because they admired the picaroon's bold carriage and believed in his cool assurance, they obeyed him, each man doffing his hat as he passed the grave figure, sitting erect in saddle there by the roadside. They were out of sight beyond a palm-grove when Long Diccon turned to the pair who had baited him.

"I am at your service, now," he said, secretly amused by the discomfiture which possessed them. "What will you ha' of me, sirs?"

"Why, why—" stammered Wrothesley, "we—we'll fight you!"

"Either one of us will, Paradene," amended Tom Anstruther. "Take your choice. And if you kill the first of us, t'other will take you on as soon as y'are refreshed. Is that plain?"

"Amplly," rejoined the picaroon. "But if you will suffer me, I have somewhat to say in this affair."

"Ah, you'd beg off," sneered Anstruther. "But 'twon't serve. Fight—or I'll run you through as you stand."

"On the contrary," remarked Long Diccon. "If y'are determined, sirs, I'll fight you both, but together."

Wrothesley bleated indignantly: "But 'twould be dishonorable, fellow! We cannot have it said—"

"Pox me, but the whole affair is dishonorable by any honorable man's standards," flamed Long Diccon. "Ha' done wi' hypocrisy. You'd slay me. Why? Because, Tom Anstruther, I love your sister—and she loves me. And as for this puppy who abets you, I dare swear he conceives himself injured because one so high above him as Mistress Felicity has seen fit to choose me rather than himself. Very well! I scorn to share equality with such as you. I'll fight you together—or not at all."

Whilst they continued to goggle at him, he turned back his cuffs and drew his rapier. "I am ready," he said. "Will you attack? Or must I?"

"But this is unthinkable, Paradene," Tom Anstruther protested. "Two against one would be butchery."

"Your two fumbling blades against mine?" Long Diccon laughed contemptuously. "I'll take on two of your kidney any day. Come, make haste."

Anstruther had the grace to flush. "By your leave," he said stiffly. "I must consult with Lieutenant Wrothesley. I cry your patience."

"So you be not long," the picaroon agreed casually.

Below him Port Royal was a checkerboard of white-and-green, vividly bright

in the hot sunshine. In the streets, he knew, the people would be running to meet the little column of horse, debouching from the Bath road. There'd be huzzas, tossing of hats in air, Sir Bantry would waddle out from Admiralty House, damning his eyes for relief. No scene could be more peaceful—yet death, as always, lurked in waiting, he reflected, scouring his blade with a handful of sand. . .

Without warning, the earth heaved beneath his feet. The fortress crumbled into ruin before his eyes. The church-spires rocked like trees in the wind. He could hear the involuntary clangor of their bells, silvery-clear above a distant wail of voices. . . The earth-shocks quickened in intensity. He staggered, trying to maintain himself erect. Seaward a wall of water was mounting higher and higher, a monstrous thing. A dull roar deafened him. He clutched at a tree-trunk, which trembled under his hand. The world about him was in chaos. The wall of water had reached the harbor-mouth. He could not be sure, but the foreshore, carrying the town with it, seemed to be sliding seaward.

Tom Anstruther and young Wrothesley wavered past him.

"Hold, you fool," croaked Long Diccon, and plucked at Anstruther's arm; but the planter shook him off. "There's gold in the strong-box, I tell you," he shouted hysterically, and plunged on. Long Diccon started to follow him, but in that instant the mountain of water struck the harbor shallows. The earth rocked and shuddered, and Long Diccon was hurled against the tree to which he had clung, the last sound to pierce his consciousness the frantic clangor of bells ringing a requiem for the lost town.

It was evening when he came to himself. At first, indeed, the roaring in his ears made him suspect the cataclysm was still in progress. But gradually he realized the utter silence which encompassed him, a silence broken only by the

booming of the surf at the foot of the hill on which he lay. Dizzy and half-nauseated, he struggled slowly to his feet. He was alone. Even the sea-birds had fled. Port Royal had disappeared. Where it had been the waters rolled, blue-green in the soft light. All that remained of its teeming, busy life were a few dismasted hulks, tossing sluggishly in the choppy swell.

He rubbed his eyes, scarce believing. Could it be possible? Port Royal gone, in all its pride! Fortress and dockyard, warehouses and mansions, churches and taverns; Sir Bantry and his red pennant; Jos Hambidge and the profits in his strongbox; the gay fellows who had ridden that morning against the French; Tom Anstruther and young Wrothesley; Solita, who had dreamed a warning for him, a warning he had rejected—and of them all, he stood alive.

"There's destiny in it," he muttered. "Ay, destiny or old Sir Harry's luck. And by'r Lady, his bones ha' gone, too! That's the sea for you. It takes back its own." He searched about until he found his rapier, then stood once more to contemplate the scene of utter desolation at his feet. "Diccon," he communed, "y'have had a double warning. Slight it not. So much the sea gives. No more. The *Jest*? Faith, the rascals may take her, and go on the Account to the risk of their filthy necks. Your way lies landward. There's 'Daunton's Favor,' and Felicity awaiting you. 'Tis sufficient for any man's portion."

He squared his shoulders, thrust down his hilt and strode off through the dust of the Bath road, spurs tinkling merrily. But was it only his spurs that played him on? Could it be possible that he heard also the muffled clang of bells, ringing in time to the pulse of the waves? After a moment he continued with a careless shrug.

"So much for pride," he ruminated. "'Tis a rich dish, and you, Diccon, ha' eaten over-much of it."



DESTINATION UNKNOWN

By CLIFFE MANVILLE

UKELL said: "We're going to have to set her down in a minute or two. Have you raised anybody, Turk?"

"You know damn well I haven't," I said, and added with sarcasm: "The great Ukell—"

"Shut up," Ukell said.

"Do you think we'll like it down there?" I said. "It's going to be wet."

"The *Mogul* will float for days," he said.

Morton said: "Yeah, on the bottom."

"You were so sure of yourself, Ukell," I said, "that you didn't even bring along a collapsible boat. We could probably use one now."

"Sharks cut 'em to pieces. They're no good. Besides it was good publicity."

"A hell of a lot of good publicity is going to do you now," Morton said.

"We'll be picked up within twenty-

four hours. Where do you make our position, Morton?" Ukell said.

"You know I don't make our position. After all, we lost the radio beam six hundred miles out of Oakland. Personally I think we're anywhere from fifty to two hundred miles out beyond the Islands."

"Maitland and Smith both made it in around twenty-six hours," I said. "We've been in the air nearly twenty-seven, and the *Mogul* is a lot faster than any ship they had in '27. We've sure been going some place."

"We've gone just as far as we're going, too. We're out of gas or will be in a couple of minutes," Ukell said.

I glanced at the gauge just as I'd been doing for the last five hours. She was down to empty, though the twins were still kicking along as if they could keep going to Australia. I looked out through

the mist of the port prop and thought about my wife and the two youngsters. A dirty trick to leave them like this. I had a hunch not to make the trip, but I'd needed the money. Any other pilot, yes. But Ukell—if there ever was a nasty, vile-tempered, vain son of a something or other, it was Ukell.

The great Ukell, I thought. Co-pilot for Sir William on the Australian hop. Thought it was a cinch to hop to the Islands and intended to prove it. Sir William's fame always galled him anyway. So we'd started out on the long wet jump from Oakland to Hawaii. Me, Turk Audley, radio op, and Morton. Morton is a good navigator, too.

But six hundred miles out we lost the beam and Ukell wouldn't turn back. Well, he was the boss, so Morton and I stayed with him. We couldn't argue him into turning back, and it would have been suicide to start a brawl in the cabin of the *Mogul* out over the blue.

I looked at the gauge again and thought about my wife and youngsters. No radio, I thought. Hadn't had in eleven hours. Burned out a generator just when we needed it most. We might have picked up the Islands' beam and come through. The last contact we'd made was twelve hundred miles out when we'd talked to the S. S. *Princeton*. The way I had it figured was we'd missed the Islands about a hundred miles and kept right on going.

Ukell said: "Get ready to duck."

Just then I heard the port motor spurt and saw the prop fold down out of a misty power circle to a stick of useless wood.

"You told the newspaper men the *Mogul* would float for a week," I said. "We're going to find out anyway."

Ukell said: "Cut the gas tanks out. They'll help keep her afloat if we don't bust them landing."

I cut off each of the tanks. We were at five thousand feet.

Morton said: "No hacksaw, no ham-

mer or chisel—no gun. You were so damned smart, Ukell."

"Yeah," I said. "If we had some tools we could cut away those motors; then we might stay up a while. Wish we had a gun, anyway."

"Gun?" Ukell sneered. "You won't need one."

"Did you ever see a twenty-foot tropical shark?" I asked, watching him closely. He paled a little, I thought, but passed it off with:

"They won't cut the ship up to get to us."

"No," I said. "But they'll cut up a collapsible boat."

Ukell said: "Do you think they're equipped with wire snips? After all, Turk, the fuselage is metal."

Morton said: "Did you ever see a shark's jaw, Ukell?"

Ukell didn't answer.



I WAS mad. I kept thinking about my wife and kids. She hadn't wanted me to come. Knew with that feminine sixth sense that something was going to happen. I was a damned fool to go against that. Besides before we hopped off from Oakland I'd hated Ukell. A man can't rightly trust another he hates. He was too sure of himself. I know he made the hop with Sir William, but he hadn't been in command then.

Twenty-five hundred cash was a lot to me, but even so it wasn't enough to land out in the middle of the Pacific for. I had five thousand in insurance and it was in the contract that if we were lost at sea my wife was to be paid anyway, but I didn't want to die. I wanted to live. I was only twenty-nine and there's a lot of life ahead of a man of twenty-nine.

I studied Ukell from the side. Close-cropped black hair; military shoulders topping a flat straight back; hard square jaw. An Australian and hard as nails.

In contrast Morton was bulky, blond, easy-going and humorous.

I looked overside. The water looked like a smooth blue carpet, but I knew it wasn't.

Ukell said: "There goes the starboard motor. We're dry. Get ready—we're going down. Anyway it's summer and the tropics."

"That's what I know," Morton said. "Tropics. Personally I'd rather be at the north pole in my underwear. I don't like sharks."

"Quit talking about sharks, will you. You'll get hysterical if you keep that up," Ukell said.

I could see it was riding him, too, and it made me feel good. I said: "Belly up to bite," remembering I'd read that somewhere. Ukell's expression didn't change. I was watching him with a sort of fascination. I'd sort of idolized the monkey before I really knew him, but that had all changed in the last week or two. I had the idea his nerve was going to crack—that he didn't have any guts. He'd been too cocksure in his preparations, and that had bothered me. I've found too, that there's something wrong with a man who can't get along with reporters. Ukell hated them. I remember the day we landed at Oakland a reporter came up to ask a question and laid his hand on Ukell's shoulder. Ukell said nastily:

"After all, that is my body."

I thought of Morton and the gun Ukell wouldn't let him bring.

"Just so much more weight," he said.

He said the same thing about packing a kit of tools to cut the motors away with in case we were forced down.

"If you're counting on not making it, there's no sense in attempting the hop at all." Ukell said.

I was beginning to see Morton's wisdom, however. In fact, I wished we did have a gun.

"She looks smooth," Morton said wistfully. "Pretty, and soft and blue and

beautiful. Only she ain't. The old Pacific has been known to kick 'em a hundred feet high. No white-caps now, but those long Pacific swells—"

"We'll take 'em. Watch us slosh down," Ukell said.

I said: "Yeah, watch us. No doubt about the sloshing. We'd better get ready for a swim."

"You won't have to swim. The motors will pull her tail well out of the water."

Ukell put the *Mogul* into a long glide and became authoritative:

"Break out all the windows. Throw everything that's loose in the cabin overboard—radio, batteries, sextant. Everything but the water-bottle and one of you hold that. We may not be able to open the door after she hits. Both of you climb as far back into her tail-feathers as you can and get a good brace on something, that'll help keep her nose up. If I can keep her head up we'll be all right. She's going to crash hard, but for one thing we've got a retractable landing gear—she'll take to water better with it up. We've got to hit the water at seventy-five miles an hour unless we have some head wind."

I picked up the metal water jug and mechanically smashed the rows of windows on each side. We threw out everything loose in the cabin and I crawled back as far as I could in the fuselage and braced my feet on a cross-brace, with the jug between my knees. Morton settled himself down in front of me.

The *Mogul* took a steeper dive and the air whipped in through the broken windows like a draft off the Styx. I watched Ukell. He was fighting the stick to hold her nose up as he leveled off. I felt the crash of the empenage as she hit the crest of a roller and the ship shook like a frightened colt. We smacked again. Then I was wrenched full length as the ship slammed into the water.

My head was thrown against the top of the fuselage covering as the tail came up. I braced my feet, but it was like

being caught on the inside of a rolling ball. I thought she'd gone clear over, and then slowly the tail settled back. Water splashed in through the broken windows.

Ukell had unbuckled his safety belt and was trying the door. He managed to force it open, and the sea rushed in up to his knees. I was dazed from the blow on my head, but scrambled up. Morton was lying half on his side from his sitting position and I saw a stream of blood from his forehead. I said:

"Help me get Morton out, Ukell."

He came back and took Morton's feet. The tail was pretty well out of the water, but the cabin was filling fast. We dragged Morton to the door, which was clear open, and pressed back against the side of the fuselage. From the doorway Ukell stepped to the port wing, which was slightly awash. He turned and got Morton's feet again and we dragged him out on the wing. Ukell propped him up with his back against the cabin, and I crawled back into the fuselage to get the water-bottle. The water was deeper inside.



OUT on the wing again I noticed the heat for the first time. It was just a little after noon and the sun was burning down from directly overhead. The sea was calm, but the swells washed over the fabric of the wings with a little slapping sound. The nose and main section of the cabin stood well out of water.

"Well, here we are," I said, wetting my handkerchief and wiping the blood off Morton's forehead.

He had a nasty gash over his right temple. I bound it up with my handkerchief and Ukell's. He'd apparently struck it when the tail came up. He opened his eyes after a moment and glanced about with a dazed look.

"Jesus—we're down, huh?" he said.

Ukell said:

"Yeah, we're down. Lucky too. I thought we were going over. That would

have been finis for us—the cabin would have been full of water before we could ever get out." Ukell was studying the ship. "If we didn't spring a leak in the gas tanks she ought to float a long time," he said.

"We smacked pretty hard," I said. "Thank God we didn't have to swim up out of the cabin. I've two packs of cigarettes in my jacket and a box of matches."

Ukell didn't smoke. Morton felt for his but they were wet. I handed him one of mine and lit it for him, lighting my own from the same match. I looked around the horizon. The sea was calm; the sky a flawless blue. I expect I could see twenty-five miles in every direction, but there was nothing but sea and sky.

I thought about my wife and what she'd be thinking. The papers would be on the streets now with glaring headlines to the effect that we were overdue. Twelve hours ago they were reporting that we couldn't be contacted by radio. It was a dirty trick to play on a woman as swell as my wife. Women always suffer for the things their men do though; I guess it's life.

I thought about my youngsters, the boy three, the girl four, and laughed as I remembered what he'd said when somebody asked him if they were twins. He said: "No, she's a girl and I'm a boy." Funny what you think of sitting on a wing that's awash in the middle of the Pacific.

Ukell said:

"We'll be picked up within twenty-four hours."

Morton said:

"We'll probably gather at the *Table of the Stags* in hell, or wherever, in another twenty-four hours. She's settled another inch since I came out of it."

I looked at the break between the wing and cabin and could see she was slightly deeper. The *Mogul* was a low-wing twin-motor job, with the power plants set on top of the wings. I wished we could cut

them loose. Might have made a lot of difference.

"She's bound to settle a little," Ukell said.

Then I saw his eyes widen as if he saw something over my shoulder, and the same instant I felt a queer bump and quiver along the wing. I turned from where I'd been leaning against the port motor in time to see a shadowy gray, torpedo-shaped fish slip under the wing. I watched him pass on the other side, the dorsal fin just cutting the surface. He was all of eighteen feet. I swallowed. He'd come right up and smacked at the wing.

"Sharks," said Morton in a queer dry voice. Just then I saw a smaller one pass close to the empenage.

I felt all dry in my throat and my solar plexus was heaving sick. I thought, "Belly up to bite," and said: "I wish we had that gun."

Ukell said: "They can't climb up on the wing," but his voice was strained, too.

He wasn't showing yellow. I saw that Australian jaw under a thirty-hour growth of black beard harden into a grim line.

Morton said:

"Damn you, Ukell, you wouldn't let me bring a gun; now look—" There was an hysterical note in his voice.

"That won't help, Morton," I said. "Take it easy." But I could see his nerve was cracking.

"Sorry," he said and dragged at his cigarette.

Ukell didn't speak but looked out across the water. We were all thinking our own thoughts.

I saw the dorsal fin of the big one wheel about and cut back toward us. He rolled up within a foot or two of the wing tip, near the surface and partly on one side, and tore at the fabric. There was a shudder through the whole ship as he ripped loose a chunk of the wing tip.

"He's hungry," I said.

"Mad, too," from Ukell.

Morton had a look of horror in his eyes, but didn't speak.



THE afternoon wore on. It was hot and the glare of the sun and water hurt my eyes.

I kept watching the sharks. There must have been a half-dozen. Every once in a while one of them would bump the ship with his ugly snout. I had the feeling they lived in a sort of haze of rage. Twice the big one tore at the port wing tip. I wished we had a gun, I didn't feel like waiting. Deep within somewhere I had the conviction we wouldn't be found. All there would be for us was slow starvation and thirst, until we were too weak to hang on, then the big drink, with those gray devils cutting us to pieces as we choked to death. Once I nearly screamed from the tension, but I didn't.

Ukell didn't say anything. No getting at what the man was thinking. One thing was certain, he wasn't showing the slimmest trace of fear. Morton talked from time to time, only a word or two, disconnected mainly, as if he were merely speaking his thoughts out loud. As the afternoon dissipated he quit talking altogether, sinking into a brooding silence. I could see the burning hatred in his eyes whenever he looked at Ukell.

I wondered how long it would be before something came of it. I hated him too, in a way, but was too stretched and worn to care much. Ukell remained cold and aloof as ever—that damned superiority of his galled me. He repeated several times we would be picked up before dark tomorrow.

Night set in swiftly after the sun dropped into the sea. We climbed up on the top of the cabin. We had to sit up, and I was so exhausted I wanted to let go and slip into the sea. I believe I would have if it had meant just the long drink, but thoughts of sharks kept me awake.

We hadn't slept in forty hours. Only a sandwich that morning. I felt weak and sick and burned out. We had drunk sparingly of the water, but I'd smoked a lot.

You'd have to be there in the dark with the water lapping over the wings and slapping against the half-submerged fuselage to know what loneliness is. Even with the three of us sitting together, to me it was like being alone. I thought of my life; of my wife and the youngsters I wouldn't see again.

Ukell kept his silence except to remark now and then about the ship. It seemed impossible for the man to loosen up his reserve. Something of the English in the Australian—that same unbending disgust at revealing an inner thought or feeling.

Once Morton dozed and started to slip forward into the sea. Ukell and I caught him between us. After that we sat closer together.

There wasn't any moon. The stars were close overhead. Toward morning it got cold. Those hours between three and dawn, when human life is said to be at its lowest ebb, were hard to live through. At last it grayed, then pinked in the east. As the light found us, Ukell got down on the wing and studied the water line. The ship was lower in. No doubt about that. The water in the cabin was pulling the empenage down. The right wing-tip, where the shark had torn away the fabric, was well under. The sea had apparently oozed in between the upper and lower covering. The left wing was a little higher out of the water and the cabin had a list to port.

Ukell said:

"We'll be picked up today."

"By our Father who art in heaven," Morton answered, and I noticed something queer in his voice. I glanced closer at his face and I didn't like the light in his eyes. He hadn't talked for hours.

I saw Ukell glance at him quickly, but he didn't speak.

"Well," I said. "What there is of the fleet at Pearl Harbor, as well as the Navy air squadrons stationed there, and every merchant ship within a radius of eight hundred miles will be looking for us. Maybe we'll get the breaks."

Morton said: "Of all the ships lost on this stretch of drink, only one's been found. Do you know that? All the rest were never heard from. Sharks," he added in an eerie whisper. "Snip a leg off at the hip—or maybe drag you down a couple hundred feet, until your head and heart burst from the pressure of the sea—screaming to God with horror!"

"Cut it, Morton," Ukell said. That same clipped voice; the cold hard tone. Morton still sat on the cabin top. Ukell was standing beside the port motor. I was leaning against the fuselage beside Morton.

There seemed to be no stopping him. His voice was pitched high—fear and hate in an unholy mixture in the tone he used. I reflected he had shown game enough until the first shark appeared, then he went to pieces. Well, every man has his own private fear. Morton's apparently was sharks—not so strange.

He said: "I tell you they know we're done. They don't mind waiting—they'll wait a week. But they know we can't win. Look at that one! Three sets of teeth to work with—the better to shred you with, my dear. Mincemeat in a matter of minutes, Ukell. How will you like that?"

"Shut up," Ukell said.

"Get hold of yourself, Morton," I added. "God man, they haven't got us yet."

"I won't shut up. Look at the ship. She's down half a foot in twelve hours. The lower she gets the faster she'll go. And who's fault is it? Yours Ukell, damn you. You're a torturing murderer. Do you know that? You wouldn't let a man bring a gun so he could die decently, would you? You'd rather let him hang on to a lousy sea-washed wreck until he

can't hang on any longer and slips into the drink to the sharks."

His voice kept rising. Ukell didn't speak, he didn't seem particularly bothered by Morton. I was sorry I ever thought the man hadn't guts. He turned his back on us and resting against the motor, looked out to sea. I looked away too. Somehow it made me sick to listen to Morton. A man ought to keep his fears from others. They're a personal matter—only to be dealt with alone.

I was reaching for a cigarette and looking towards the eastern horizon, lost in thoughts of my wife and kids. Ukell's back was still turned. I must have been half dreaming, because I didn't hear Morton slip down off the fuselage to the wing. The first I heard was his scream and curse as he dove across the wing onto Ukell's back. His right arm wrapped around the pilot's throat. Ukell tried to throw him off, but Morton had him in a death grip around the neck and was pulling him back. Morton was a big man. Ukell went to his knees in a vain attempt to break the other's hold, but Morton hung on, still cursing in a hysterical voice.

I jumped across the wing, every second expecting they would both fall into the sea. Grabbing a motor mounting with my left hand I began beating Morton in the face with my right. Ukell's face was turning red and I knew he was choking. Then I put everything I had into a swing that caught Morton on the left side of his face on the point of the jawbone, and he went limp.

One foot slipped off the wing and he would have gone overboard if I hadn't grabbed his shoulder. I dragged him back on the wing. Ukell, on his hands and knees, was gasping for breath.

"He's crazy," I said.

"Thanks," Ukell said hoarsely. "I wonder how long he's been figuring that one out. Had me cold."

"Fear does funny things to a man," I said.

Morton was still out. His face was beginning to swell where I'd hit him.

"Take your belt, Ukell," I said, "and we'll tie his hands behind him."

"He'll be all right," Ukell said.

We propped him up against the cabin and he came to. He spit out some blood and looked at us for a moment in a sort of sick ashamed way, then he said:

"Why didn't you push me over. I'm yellow."

"Forget it," Ukell said.

I looked at Morton close. His eyes were sane again, and his voice was like it should be. He sat there gazing at his feet and shaking his head.

The sun was beginning to burn, and the glare of the sea was maddening torture. We hadn't slept in more than fifty hours. You begin to think crazy thoughts after being awake so long; your eyes play tricks on you. I took a cigarette and pinched my pack to see how many were left. It was the second pack and I counted three between my fingers. The smoke burned my throat with irritation rather than satisfaction.

Ukell was studying the ship again.

"Looks like one of the tanks sprang a slow leak when we hit. The *Mogul* won't stay up more than ten or twelve hours at the rate she's logging now," he said dispassionately. "If they're going to find us, it better be soon."

I could see she was a lot lower. I figured if she got down much further there'd be a quick dive and we'd be done. I was so tired I didn't give a damn any longer. I just wanted to sleep. If I had to take a long drink of salt water first, with the cutters coming in, I didn't care much either.

At noon we finished the last of the water. The heat was terrible over the calm sea. I felt I was slowly going crazy from exhaustion. The *Mogul* was settling faster. By mid-afternoon it looked as if it would be a matter of an hour or two at most. The port wing was well under and we were all on the starboard

side in an effort to hold her on an even keel. She was lying at an angle that would give her a sweet wing-slip right to bottom.

Ukell turned to us after a long examination of the ship. His jaw was still in that hard line; his eyes red-rimmed but game.

"I guess the show's up, men," he said. "Sorry I got you into this." He hesitated a moment. "I didn't want you to bring a gun along because of weight for one thing, but for another reason too. After all, I'm responsible for your lives in a sense. I should have turned back when we lost the beam, but I was stubborn. I've always hated to quit. I hate to quit now. I figured if you had a gun you might quit before the end—before every chance of rescue was gone."

"Well," I said. "What's the difference?"

"There's none now, but there might have been. Anyway, I've a pack of razor blades. New ones. We can open our wrists and let life drain out. Nothing to it. No pain. We just sit up together until unconsciousness takes us. Then the sharks won't matter. I'm sorry I got you into this."

Morton said: "I hate a knife."

"I'll cut them for you, Morton, You'll never feel it," Ukell said. "How about you, Turk?"

"I'll cut my own," I said. "One look at those babies overside makes anything else easy."

While he talked he had reached into his jacket pocket and drawn out a pack-

age of blades. He ripped the end loose and shook the separately wrapped knives into the palm of his hand.

"I know both of you hate me—most men have," he said thoughtfully, and there was a wistful tone in his voice I hadn't found him guilty of before. "I've always had a nasty disposition," he went on. "Born mean, I guess. But let's go out decently—like gentlemen. Will you shake hands with me? I don't care about heroics, but I'd feel a lot better facing this unknown destination of ours feeling you didn't hate me too much."

"Hell," I said. "I never had anything against you, Ukell, except that I thought your nerve would crack in a pinch. It hasn't."

Morton said:

"Destination unknown, that's it, but we'll get there together—like gentlemen."

He seemed calm now and resigned. The fear was gone as far as I could see.

I think Ukell heard it first. I thought my ears were fooling me. He held up his hand for silence. There wasn't any doubt a moment later. I knew a surge of joy and the clammy grip of fear the same instant. Fear that they wouldn't see us. A second later we saw her coming—a big Navy bomber. We waved frantically, but they'd already spotted us. She swooped down on the calm sea and taxied up to us.

We'd been down thirty hours and were a hundred and fifty miles northwest of the Islands. I thought about my wife and the youngsters and how good life was. Funny, I wasn't tired at all then.





THE CAMP-FIRE



IN this issue begins a Western book-length, "The Feud at Single Shot," which is the first serial by a new writer, Luke Short. He says briefly of himself:

Born in Illinois. Graduated U. of Missouri. Have worked as factory-hand, waiter, bus boy, elevator boy, reporter, archeologist's assistant, and trapper.

Traveled in Europe and Hawaiian Islands. Lived two years in Canadian sub-Arctic sixty miles from nearest post, mostly on moose, deer and caribou hunted by myself. Like to drive dogs, talk to Indians, read anything, live in any snowy country, paddle, pole or track a canoe; travel anywhere or any time on water. Dislike towns over 10,000, heat, gin, shooting animals, alarm-clocks, apartment houses, new hats and radios.

Married, live with wife on cowless ranch outside Santa Fe, New Mexico.

LUKE SHORT makes these remarks about his story:

I've always suspected that if authors would only admit it, their story plots have queer histories. A remembered face, a line of conversation, or a pet hate or liking are responsible for many of them. This one is based on a minor phobia of mine which heretofore I've managed to keep secret. Now, I'm curious to know how many other people share it. It's this: I can never look at an impounded body of water without immediately picturing (with all the gory details) what would happen if the dam broke. I can spend an hour imagining houses afloat, livestock drowned and drowning, fields wasted, and even the traditional flood scene with the mountain lion sharing his housetop perch with a frantic child and a small pup. I've never had to fight the impulse to hunt up some dynamite and blow out a dam, but the curiosity, nevertheless, is still there.

The sheriff in the yarn is salvaged from reportorial days. He is drawn from life, but as is usually the case with fiction, he didn't quite receive justice. I didn't dare

make him the comic he is in life for fear of being disbelieved. Every vag, transient bindle-stiff and plain bum who was brought before him, he would greet with the same statement. "You might as well confess now. We've got the goods on you, so"—and here he would reach for paper and pencil, the implements of confession—"you better come clean. Save us both trouble." And, I might add, I never saw his offer accepted, usually because the man or boy before him was guilty of nothing except poverty. But for all that, he had a simple kindness that more than canceled his unconscious clowning.

And this sheriff reminded me of another ex-sheriff whom I met while he was superintending the construction of a small reservoir in southern New Mexico. It was a rush job, for the snows and rains were piling up the water behind the dam at an alarming rate, and there was a small settlement a half mile below. This ex-sheriff, by the way, had some hay fields down on the flat irrigated by this water. My phobia was at work and I asked him his opinion of the probable consequences should the rains continue and the dam wash out.

"I reckon I'd get more water than I paid for," was his reply.

From dams to sheriffs is a fantastic line of thought to account for a story, but there it is.

Regards to the Camp-Fire circle.

FROM Arthur O. Friel, some words about the characters and setting in "Killer's Gold."

In connection with my story I wish to say emphatically that not all Venezuelans are like those depicted here. To you old-timers, who recall other yarns wherein I have characterized the better type of Latin-American, no such statement is necessary. However, newcomers are joining the Camp-Fire gang all the time, and, since the more decent sort of Orinocan doesn't enter into this story, I feel like making this point clear.

On the other hand, that Amazonas region

of the Orinoco is a hard country and always more or less infested by the two-legged wolves of a wild frontier. San Fernando in particular was just as I've described it—and may be again, if it is again inhabited. My last information from down there was that the town had been deserted for a new one at the great *raudales* downstream; so I have built the story on that basis.

So far as I know, the cache of Funes never has been found. Certainly Cedeño failed to locate it; and so did the next federal governor, who lived in the Funes house. Its whereabouts was still a mystery during my two sojourns at the town. There was a persistent belief that the closet held the key to the enigma, but no digging or thumping would make it betray any secret. So, *compañeros*, there's something to dream about if you like. I wouldn't go after it, though, if I were you. Me, I leave hidden hoards alone. I'm not superstitious, but I've known of some ghastly things happening to men who dug into buried treasure; and I'm not yet ready for my own grave.

HAWKS have more friends than you might expect. There's even a sanctuary set aside for them, and I wonder what a certain farmer friend of mine would say to that. Here are two letters, the first from Davis Quinn, *Ask Adventure* expert on ornithology.

Mr. Pelham is right. A stuffed owl set in a conspicuous place may attract hawks. But why this urge to kill hawks? Not because they are harmful, for the evidence proves they are in the main beneficial. Beneficial to game, to the farmer, and to wild life generally. These useful birds kill rats and other rodents that destroy the eggs of ground-nesting game birds; they help keep in check the rodent pests of the farmer; they constitute an important factor in maintaining a healthy stock among the smaller forms of wild life, by weeding out the weak and unfit, the crippled and diseased individuals. Hawks thus check wild life epidemics, uncontrollable by man.

Hawks are among the most beautiful and interesting of birds. Their skill on the wing and their fearlessness are unsurpassed in the animal kingdom. What finer spectacle than the dizzy stoop of the falcon, a literal power dive after prey as fast as teal? And what better exemplifies bird's mastery of the air than the *buteo*, climbing out of sight against the sun, in slow spirals without ever a perceptible motion of its ample pinions? Yet

these birds have everywhere been so reduced in numbers by the constant persecution by gunners that to those who enjoy merely to observe and study and admire them the sight of a stooping falcon or of a soaring *buteo* is no longer common.

If the birds of prey are chiefly beneficial, why are they being harassed to the point of extinction? Largely because of propaganda disseminated (through advertising and otherwise) by arms and ammunition makers eager to encourage the sale of their products out of the regular shooting seasons. There is a certain class of gunner who shoots for the sake of killing; to him appeals this idea of slaughtering hawks when it is not legal to destroy other living creatures.

Game breeders, interested in no wild species outside of game, are down on hawks, naturally, because it is true certain hawks may occasionally take game, even though the amount of game thus taken is but a split fraction of the annual kill by hunters. Much of our alarming game shortage, and even the present critical state of the wildfowl, has been blamed on the depredations of hawks. But the accusers are silent on the fact that when, years ago, game was still abundant, hawks were abundant too. And today, with the hawks killed off practically down to the point of extinction in many places, the game has not come back. Nor will it ever, unless the guns are silenced for a breathing spell, before it is too late.

The average sportsman may bag his limit of game birds, and not being able to eat them all or give them away, he leaves the birds where they drop, to rot. Yet when a hawk eats a game bird, the dog-in-the-manger sportsman cries, "Vermin!" And though that game bird belonged less to the sportsman than to hawk, the luckless raptor, an easy target for even schoolboy marksmanship, falls before the greed of the lord-with-a-gun.

Now, maybe too late, far-seeing conservationists in New York and other states have built up laws to protect the vanishing predators. Mr. Pelham presumably did not realize that in the county to which he refers the sparrow hawk and the chicken hawk are both protected species.

There will be a lot of woods-goin' gentry rear up on their hind legs and paw the air when they read the above point of view (if you print it) on this sore subject. But you said, only the other day, that this little circle of campfire-setters has been quiet and peaceful-like for so long it sort of hankers for a lead-spatterin' free-for-all. Well, maybe here it is. Also I may have to do the ducking single-handed, but my back's against the wall,

and plenty unused ammunition itches under a cocked hammer.

AND Warren F. Eaton, in charge of the Hawk and Owl Campaign, of the National Association of Audubon Societies, sends a copy of a finely illustrated book, "The Hawks of North America," and the letter that follows. I hope that either he or Mr. Quinn will carry the subject further—what about crows? Aren't they enemies of game birds, or are they also believed to have some uses?

As a youngster, I had some silver duckwing game bantams. One chipper little fellow was learning to crow when a hawk came out of the blue. It was while scrambling for stones and watching that hawk go off with my personal bantam that I formed an opinion of hawks that makes both of these letters rather astonishing.

In looking over your article which appears in the issue of May 15 regarding the shooting of hawks over a decoy owl, I should like to register the protest of the National Association of Audubon Societies and the Hawk and Owl Society, and of any other groups who are interested in the preservation of our raptorial birds.

Investigations made by the foremost scientists and ornithologists in the country, dating from 1890 to the present time, indicate that most of our species of hawks and owls are beneficial rather than destructive to farming, forestry and horticultural interests, as they furnish a control on many destructive rodent and insect pests. Such species as the sparrow hawk, to some extent the short-eared owl, the pigeon hawk and the red-shouldered and broad-winged hawk feed quite considerably upon insects; the sparrow hawk particularly on grasshoppers. Practically all owls and most of the species of hawks feed to considerable extent also on rats, mice, weasels, snakes and the like. Certain species, however, feed very largely upon game birds and poultry and it is because of the damage done by these that most hawks are looked upon with little respect by the farmer.

By and large, we believe that no hawk should be killed except in the act of damaging property; that all the beneficial species should be protected by law and that the kill-

ing of the other species should be carried on only in accordance with the attached principles:

"Whenever a species of bird or other wild animal becomes so disproportionately numerous that, by its feeding habits or otherwise, it clearly disturbs the balance of nature or becomes seriously detrimental to the interests of mankind, we believe that control should be exercised, but only after careful scientific examination has demonstrated the need thereof; and that such control should be carried out only by properly qualified authorities."

As regards the shooting of hawks over a decoy for "sport" alone, we believe this practice is much to be condemned as most hunters cannot tell one species of hawk from another. We believe that killing for "sport" alone in this way is most undesirable, and our organizations have been taking measures to protect these birds at the places where they are killed freely in migration. Due to the rapid decrease of many species over considerable areas of the country, noted by ornithologists in all their publications, a hawk mountain sanctuary for hawks particularly has been formed by the purchase of a couple of thousand acres of mountain land where the hawks migrate through in Pennsylvania, by a group of New York people headed by Mrs. Charles N. Edge, of the Emergency Conservation Committee. The most up-to-date scientific facts on this whole matter may be found in a book called "The Hawks of North America," by Dr. John B. May, circular of which is attached. Any of your readers desiring a copy of the circular, or to purchase the book may obtain it by writing the National Association of Audubon Societies, 1775 Broadway, New York, N. Y., and they can form their own conclusions based on scientific facts.

ONE of our stories inspires Carlos Head, of Taft, California, to send in this one. We can't, however, make him the same payment, on the ground of, let's say, implausibility.

After reading the story "Live Bait," by John Morse, in the May 15th issue, I am moved to write you an "off the trail" story myself.

Briefly, it is the story of once upon a time when I rode a bull down into the depths of the ocean, fought and killed a huge man eating shark and then, instead of swimming to the top, I had the bull horn a rock from the ocean bed and we floated to the surface

on it. If he can violate the laws of nature and mechanics, so can I.

I have seen many of those huge eels he describes and they are every bit as savage and bloodthirsty as he says they are. But an eel is a fish, having gills and breathing water. They would not, could not, emerge from the water to seek their prey any more than any other fish. Furthermore, an eel has no legs and its body is covered with slime so that it would be impossible for it to control its motions on land.

Now as to the rock which tilted and caught his foot. He describes it as a flat rock and since it tilted, it must have rested on a central pivot. He says a weight of thirty pounds on the further side would have lifted the rock and released his foot. Why, then, did he not apply a *lift* of thirty pounds on his side and so escape? It is my opinion that so stupid a man should have been most completely eaten by the eels.

By the way, I killed the shark by biting its head off. Since my story is no more unlikely than that of Mr. Morse, I shall expect the same payment.

A FORMER wolf trapper writes from Woodbury, New Jersey, taking a slight issue with Harold Titus. He knows, he says, of a case in which wolves did attack a man—also another case in which a she bear with cubs did not attack.

The letter from Harold Titus, in the May 15th issue, interested me very much. Every reliable wolfer or trapper I have ever known, claims wolves will not attack man, but I found one exception.

In 1907 I met a man in Ketchikan, Alaska, who told me a wolf story that I did not believe until I became better acquainted with the teller. The man was coming from a Government salmon hatchery on the west coast of Prince of Wales Island, down to the beach. A distance of about three miles, over a well travelled trail. The season was an open winter, with deer plentiful. Three wolves walked out into the trail about seventy-five yards in front of him, and with only a pause of a split second, started towards him. He shot all three of them and the last one was about ten feet from him when it stopped rolling.

I knew that man about four years and would accept his word under any and all conditions.

The claim that a female bear will fight to protect her young from man is not always

correct. I have known of only one case where a man walked in between a bear and her cubs, and in that case the bear, a black bear, ran from the man without him firing a shot.

Have you ever thought how strange it is, that we, who call ourselves civilized, will grant a license to men to go into the woods and kill deer for *sport*, yet murder wolves for killing them to eat. I have trapped, poisoned, and hunted them for bounty, so I am not taking a fling at somebody else. Merely at man.

TARANTULAS. A couple of readers have something to say at the Camp-Fire about these fellows, and the readers have been there and seen them, and one of them got himself punctured. The first letter is from C. Hutchinson, of Bucyrus, Ohio.

Noticed in June 15th issue that someone seems to be doubting "the harmless tarantula's" pacific nature. You'd have good reason to doubt him if you might be permitted to watch a gang of caged ones doing their cannibal act. You talk about butchery!

On the other hand, here is an experience of mine, which may show just the opposite. (I've never been bitten, so perhaps this disqualifies me for the argument.)

While living on a ranch near Dewey, Arizona, one morning as I swung my heels out of bed, a black shadow scuttled from under the bed and stopped under the afore-mentioned heels (same being withdrawn hurriedly). It was a fair sized "hairy one," about as large as a saucer. Having read a very sensible and authoritatively written article pertaining to this dark gentleman, I proceeded to put some theories into effect. A bit of paper at the end of a string, to dangle before him (or her) and a slow clutch with thumb and forefinger behind the staring eyes (must have seen me, but didn't move) and after a moment's queer feeling at the hairiness of the brute, up he goes kicking and squirming to be gradually placed on a bare forearm.

His legs clutching and fangs hoisted for a drive at the least bad move, and myself scared and sweating, then a stroking forefinger along his back, and sink me for a liar if he didn't relax and put away those food grinders of his! Carried him about for a bit, then put him outside, picked him up twice more in about a minute and he didn't do more than jerk his legs. Finally let him

go and away he popped under the grass. Feeling rather big over the success of the experiment, nevertheless I'm no authority on all tarantulas. Afterward saved many from wasps, figuring they might be relatives of my fuzzy pal.

The story referred to was in "Outdoor Recreation" if I remember correctly, and was a dandy. Some notes from it were "that California tarantulas are larger than Arizona types, which in turn are larger than New Mexican and Texas spiders." "The fangs of a large specimen must be pulled loose from a wound—best to leave bite alone and not even squeeze it"—"fangs can make dents in a soft wood pencil"—(tried that one with a cottonwood twig and discernible marks were left in it)—"hills near Los Angeles are lousy with them" (the author's (of the story) children made a specialty of playing with them) "horned toads and tarantulas caged—the toad will kill the spider."

So, far be it from me to kill one of the beasties unless he's in my bed or cupboard. I sort of like him now, but at that, wouldn't care to pick them up for a living.

In closing—I've read *Adventure*, thru subscription and news stands since "befo' the war"—still remember most vividly the after war stories of Nason "Sergeant of Cavalry," and so on. It's the one magazine I buy without looking past the cover. The stories are always good.

AND John D. Wilson, of Chicago, Illinois, is a reader who has had more than his share of tarantulas and scorpions.

May I have a say in the tarantula controversy? Am still carrying a memento of a tarantula bite received from the Cuban variety. Was down there for five-six years, up and down the island, usually operating on theatres for the Paramount-Publix circuit. Vacationed on the island, and during one of those vacations was bitten.

Happened in a little summer resort in the Province of Camaguey. Up on the north coast, near Nuevitas. The hotel employees used to catch the tarantulas at night and keep 'em in little pasteboard boxes, one to the box, and then every day there'd be tarantula fights for the amusement of the guests. They'd put two of 'em in a large box about two feet square, and the hairy spiders would battle it out until one or the other or both were dead. Have never seen anything so doggedly determined in the attempt to annihilate one another. Sometimes they would

have only one leg apiece, and still they'd fight on to the end.

But, I'm digressing. My bite came about in this way. I was lying in a hammock one night on the ground floor veranda of the hotel. Had been smoking and thought that I'd tossed away my cigarette stub. Looking over the side of the hammock, saw what appeared to be the stub glowing just beneath me. Reached over to put it out and felt a sharp pinch, then a burning sensation in my wrist. Jumped out of the hammock, lit a match and saw I had hold of one of the big hairy fellows. Crushed him beneath my heel and rushed into the hotel for first aid. One of the black boys who did odd jobs about the place ran out to the poultry yard and came back with a young live chicken. With one wrench he pulled the chicken apart and placed the still quivering flesh on the now swelling wrist. My ideas of first aid differed, though, and so I slashed the wound with a razor blade and applied iodine. There were two tiny little punctures, purplish in color. Had fever that night, and no sleep. Next morning, the darkie, Manuelo, insisted that I try his treatment once more. He repeated the treatment and within a short time the swelling had abated. Healed entirely in a week, though the scars remained. Wouldn't care about repeating the experience, though.

Another poisonous little pest we had to be careful of was the scorpion. There were what seemed to me to be two distinct varieties, the black and the red. We gave both a wide berth, but particularly the red ones. Used to notice that old timers would lift their shoes by the toes and tap 'em on the floor before putting 'em on every morning. Reason became apparent when, one morning, I slipped my foot into my shoe and felt a red hot needle jabbing itself repeatedly into my foot. Scorpion, and a red one at that. Used a tourniquet, and slashed the stings, making 'em bleed freely. Was in a city then and had medical aid, but was prone to use the live chicken treatment. Thereafter, I tapped my shoes out each morning religiously, and the habit has stuck with me, much to the amusement of my wife.

Among the lower class Cubans, the practice is never to kill a scorpion when found in the home, but to catch it, start an overhand knot in a piece of string, slip the loop over the stinger joint of the tail, pull it tight, and thus relieve Mr. Alacran of his stinging ability. They say that they devour the roaches, and never regrow the sting.

Had plenty of opportunity to test the theory that a scorpion will commit suicide if

surrounded by fire. They surely will. We'd set fire to all the edges of a piece of newspaper, lay it on the ground and toss a scorpion in the center. He'd rush frantically from one side to the other, then, seeing no escape, flip his tail up over his back and sting himself in the center of the thorax, and fall over. Have never seen it miss.

Oh, yes, the name of the town, if such it can be called, where the tarantula chewed me was San Jacinto. Don't try to find it on the map, for it had then only about ten or twelve houses and a hotel. Just a little summer resort for the town of Camaguey. Governor of the province used to summer up there and he was present at the time. Town is the last stop before the town of Puerto Tarafa and is on the coast across from Cayo Sabinal.

May Adventure go on in its stride. For awhile, only loyalty to its memory kept many of us buying it week after week, but, once more, it's getting to be the Adventure of old and thousands of us are welcoming its every appearance upon the news stands.

COMMENTS on Eddy Orcutt's off-the-trail novelette, "Jim Jeffries and Dumb Julius." Every mention we've had of that experimental yarn has been, I'm glad to say, a favorable one.

It was one of the best stories I have read in a long time. Print any good story that comes your way so long as it is a man's story.

JAMES MORSE,
San Francisco, California.

An orchid for Orcutt. Great yarn and he knows both the box game and good English.

JOHN S. ROBEL,
Chicago, Illinois.

The Jim Jeffries story was swell—you knew it. Also liked very much the Hendryx "appendicitis operation" yarn.

J. W. DONLY
New York City.

I hereby register one completely affirmative vote. How could any one—editor or otherwise—even hesitate over a story like that one? If you can get a copy into the hands of Bill Brown, it would be interesting to see what Bill thinks—and I'll bet he would like it.

With all due respect, however, I think your outstanding yarn in an exceptional issue, is "Jase Quill, Surgeon." I have an old friend who treasures an ancient .44 once presented to him by Swiftwater Bill and I

can hardly wait to hear my friend's comments on Jase and his friends.

S. C. HULSE,
Bedford, Pennsylvania.

May I tell you how much I enjoyed "Jim Jeffries and Dumb Julius" in the June issue? Off the trail it certainly was. I've followed Adventure for years and have never seen the like, but for a nice, workmanlike job of telling a story, it's right there and I think I know. Incidentally it brought back memories of a South Dakota town and a bunch of anxiously waiting kids who flouted the curfew law to learn the outcome of that battle in Reno. Thanks to you and Eddy Orcutt. Do it again some day.

BENNETT FOSTER,
Springer, New Mexico.

THAT cover of the sailor and the monkey—we've had the wrong interpretation of it all the time, says J. H. Mitchell, of Atmore, Alabama.

Your most recent issue contains further comment on that most unusual cover which you insist is a "sailor trying to teach a monkey how to tie a knot."

Couldn't the reverse be true? The monkey does not understand why any one should be so painstaking and become so exasperated in an attempt to tangle a rope. It is really a very simple matter, as he blandly demonstrates.

After all a knot is just a knot to most of us monkeys.

WELL, the cover of the next issue shows the sailor and the monkey again, and the sailor is still mad at that monkey. This time the monkey is mad, too.

Now I have thought up both of these ideas, and maybe have another or two tucked away, and I like that sailor and his monkey and hope to see them on the cover now and again. But having other chores to do and never any shrapnel-burst of ideas at any time, I may bog down on the job of providing occupation for that sailor and monkey. Likely some antics for those friendly enemies will occur to some of you Camp-Fire sitters—they'll be much appreciated if you send them along.

—H. B.



ASK ADVENTURE

THE history of a battle fleet is the galloping history of inventions.

Request:—Did destroyers in either the United States or British navies about the year 1910 use coal for fuel? Were destroyers ever fueled with coal? If so, about what year? Approximately what was their cruising radius and speed? Were naval vessels usually equipped with radio at that time?

In your opinion, would it be too far-fetched in fiction to suppose that a South American country could have purchased a destroyer to augment their navy about that same year, 1910?

If so, would the order be for a new boat, or would an obsolete American destroyer be likely to fill their needs? Supposing an order were placed, would the firm, or country, supplying the vessel deliver her with a skeleton crew, or would the country purchasing send a crew for her?

In the case of such a purchase, would she be equipped with torpedo tubes and supplied with torpedoes? How many tubes, and what sized armament?

How many men would form a minimum operating crew for a destroyer of that period?

—STEWART R. COX, Independence, Calif.

Reply by Lieut. Comdr. Vernon C. Bixby:—Your questions are difficult to answer, first, because 1910 was in the midst of that periodic change which is the natural result of experience and development. The round-the-world cruise terminating 1908 taught the navy many things and led to a change of design in about every type of vessel. And, secondly, as I entered the service late in the year 1910 and in 1911 went aboard a battleship newly commissioned, my experience with what we call the "Old Navy" is limited to observation and experiencing that gradual change starting in that year. The following answers are correct and wherein any doubt has existed, I have been conservative in my statements.

The destroyer, as we know it today, did not exist in 1910. We had the torpedo boat. The torpedo boats were not over 150 feet in length, had a displacement of not less than

350 tons or more than 600 tons, carried about four torpedo tubes, one gun, usually a six-pounder, several automatic rifles (.30 cal.) either the Colt or the Benet-Mercier, both of which were prone to jam at the wrong time. The former used a web belt and the latter a bronze strip holding about thirty cartridges. The destroyers were evolved to combat the torpedo boats and first appeared about 1913. The torpedo boats were all coal burning, as were the first of the destroyers. Even during the war (1917) our older destroyers were coal burning. The first vessel, the *U.S.S. Delaware*, equipped for oil burning was commissioned in 1911. Even then, she carried both coal and oil.

The torpedo boats in 1910 had a speed of about twenty knots and a cruising radius of about 500 miles. This was dependent upon weather conditions and the state of the sea. They made bad weather of it even in a moderate sea. I recall seeing the *U.S.S. Worden* in drydock in either 1911 or '12, after being towed in from "off Hatteras" with about twenty feet of her stern gone. The seas knocked it off.

In 1910 the smaller ships, such as torpedo boats, gunboats and even cruisers were not fitted with radio. In either 1911 or '12, we were experimenting with radio on board ship, using the old quenched spark set. In fact, one of the duties of the smaller and faster boats, was to act as dispatch-boat and carry messages between the ships of the fleet.

It would be entirely reasonable to suppose that a small power in South America would purchase a vessel for their navy. Private ship-yards in this country have at various times, built and outfitted ships for the navies of smaller powers. We built the *Riviera* for Argentina (a battleship); we built about six submarines for Chili and in 1912 or '13 we sold two old battleships to Greece (I believe the old Idaho and Missouri). It was customary for the countries concerned to send a skeleton crew for instruction and to assist in making delivery.

All armament and equipment, including guns, torpedoes, and ammunition could be installed provided the United States was on friendly terms with the country concerned

and that this smaller power was not at war with a power friendly to the United States.

I have a suggestion to make and not knowing just what you have in mind, it may be an unwarranted presumption on my part. The torpedo boats were poor sea boats, ungodly hot, coal burning and seldom made any long runs without an escort. Temperatures in the fireroom were commonly 150° to 175° F. and the firemen would use oatmeal with drinking water to prevent vomiting. Firemen frequently "passed out" and the steel weather decks in a tropical sun would blister through a pair of shoes. Living conditions would be nearly impossible and I doubt whether a torpedo boat could last through a real tropical storm. Repairs to the hull and cleaning and painting the steel bottom would be almost impossible without a drydock. The best type of boat for the time and place would be a wooden hulled vessel, copper sheathed, two hundred feet long, six foot draft, coal burning and two reciprocating engines. She might mount two six-pound rapid-fire rifles and several machine-guns. Speed fifteen knots and a cruising radius of 1000 miles. If torpedoes are essential, she could carry one twin tube on the fan-tail. This type of vessel could be either a converted yacht or built under contract.

I am making this recommendation because of the extreme heat, need for plenty of ventilation in the firerooms and living spaces (natural and not forced ventilation would be used) and because all repairs and upkeep would probably have to be effected by the ship's force.

Twenty-five men could handle such a boat or a torpedo boat in an emergency for a short period of time but it would require double that number for any extensive operation.

HOW to purify water. Another résumé for campers.

Request:—Please let me know how to purify water without boiling it.

We have to use creek water for all purposes. There aren't any towns or residences along the creek, but the water is in holes now so that the creek has stopped flowing.

—WM. B. PATTON, Spofford, Tex.

Reply by Dr. Claude P. Fordyce:—I have your letter referring to the purifying of water without boiling. Inasmuch as your water supply is in holes it is probably contaminated, possibly with disease germs, and needs filtering also. I would take no chances with this water, so carefully process it as suggested below.

Container. I would invest in a wooden keg, take out the top and make a wooden cover which sets over the top and fix a faucet at the bottom—keg resting on closed end. The purpose of this is to have a large opening for pouring in water and to allow a gas to escape which we will use to purify the water. If you filter it, get two wooden candy buckets to treat the water in and a quart (preferably enameled) funnel to run the water through (filter substance to be in funnel) before putting in the keg. Mail order catalog price on five-gallon keg is \$1.49.

Sterilizing the water. This is done with a chlorine preparation—which method is used in all city water supplies. There is no danger as the gas evaporates after a half hour and should leave no taste. For camp kits where small quantities of water are to be sterilized, I recommend Halazone Tablets (Abbott Laboratories, Chicago). Add one tablet to each quart of water and let stand twenty minutes. For larger quantities you can use chlorinated lime and if you will remove it from the can and store in a mason jar it will not lose its strength. From this supply a stock solution is made every six days and kept in a mason jar in a dark place. To make the stock solution mix a half level teaspoonful of lime to a pint of water. To use: add one teaspoonful of the stock solution to ten gallons of water (thirty-six drops to one gallon of water, or nine drops to one quart of water). Let stand for a half hour before use. As chlorinated lime is corrosive to metal I have recommended containers of wood.

Filter. Fix the funnel above the keg with faucet. In this funnel you can stuff common absorbent (surgical) cotton and run the water through it. Inasmuch as you will need to handle much water it would be well to get 100 cotton filter discs, 6 inches in diameter (priced at 31 cents in mail order catalogs) and place this in the funnel. To still further purify bad tasting water place some small pieces of charcoal on top of the cotton.

Water purified by the lime in wood buckets after twenty minutes is not corrosive to metal and you can store in a metal container. I have used a five gallon milk kettle with top drawn in to a wide opening, then covered the whole kettle with several layers of wool blanketing. Now if you wet this cover and set the can in a breeze you will get coolness by evaporation as in a desert water bag.

THE eagle on Napoleon's standard was of gilded copper.

Request:—Did the eagles on Emperor Napoleon's first standards and other insignia

have a crown? (Of course this was after his being made emperor.)

—P. J. RYAN, Vancouver, B. C.

Reply by Capt. Glen R. Townsend:—The Napoleonic Eagles were without the crown under the empire as well as before. I find the following description in the original instructions given by Napoleon about the time he became emperor: "An eagle looking to the left, with wings half expanded, and with its talons grasping a thunderbolt, as in the old Roman Standard."

As the idea was developed the eagle was made of copper, gilded over. It measured eight and one-half inches in height by nine and one-half inches from wing tip to wing tip. Below the thunderbolt, as base and support, was a brass tablet on which the number of the regiment to which the eagle belonged appeared. The eagle was attached to the top of an eight-foot oaken staff, painted imperial blue, the regimental colors being attached to the staff at an appropriate distance below.

So far as I have been able to learn no change was ever made in the design of the eagles and in fact those which are preserved in military museums are all exactly as described above with one exception. And the exception may have led some to believe that a crown had been added to the design. After Jena and Austerlitz the municipal government of Paris voted a gold wreath to be added to the eagles of those regiments which had taken the most active part in the campaign. The idea pleased the Emperor and the gold wreath was added to the eagles of a large number of regiments.

These wreaths, therefore, had no connection with the imperial crown of Bonaparte, but simply represented the crowning of the victor with laurel leaves as in the ancient Olympic games. At least one of these laurel crowned eagles was later captured by British troops during the Peninsular Wars.

I hope the foregoing gives you the information desired and will be of use to you. The complete story of the Napoleonic Eagles has been written by Edward Fraser in "The War Drama of the Eagles", published by E. P. Dutton and Co., New York, 1912, and the information given above is based on Mr. Fraser's exhaustive researches.

IT takes heat to bend horn. But not too much.

Request:—I should like to know by what means horn can be softened to permit mold-

ing into knife handles, pistol grips and such small objects.

—J. T. HOWARD, Fergus Falls, Minn.

Reply by Capt. Robert E. Gardner:—Horn, if not of great density, can be softened by steaming. If of greater thickness, boiling. Do not permit the water to come to a galloping boil and be sure to keep the horn from contact with the hot bottom of the container. Suspend the horn in the water with a wire.

WHEN you take up your bed and walk, here's how to make it a light and warm pack.

Request:—Will you please give your opinion of the sleeping bag I intend to make.

I expect to use it on a prospecting trip in Alaska, and as that will entail quite a bit of back-packing, I must have as light an outfit as is practical. Also I must make every nickel count as my finances are extremely limited. (Ever see a prospector that wasn't?)

What I have in mind is to use a under-layer of wool blanketing, say an army blanket, then a layer of bird feathers—think I can get domestic goose but might have to use chicken feathers—then a layer of flannel which will be the inside of the bag, and a light, waterproof cover of something like balloon silk, probably Tanalite would be better, because of the darker color. The bag will be closed with a zipper, and have a flap over the opening to keep out rain, also a canopy over the head for the same purpose. Feathers will be quilted, so they will stay in position. Bag will be shaped to conform to the body as much as possible, something on the order of the Fiala bags. The blanketing will be doubled on the bottom, where the back will naturally be, and at the foot. Intend making it roomy enough so that I can use a couple of blankets inside in colder weather.

I know that so-called "eider down" is used in the higher class bags, but since the duck is protected (I think) I'm afraid that most of them are filled with good old hen hair. Please tell me what filling you consider warmest for the weight involved, and what kind of feather is most suitable.

Will balloon silk and such materials get stiff and crack or break in cold weather?

Where could I get one of the "Talon Hookless Fasteners"?

Do you think it would be a good idea to stick the seams together as well as sew them, to prevent leaking at the seams? What kind

of glue or cement would you suggest that would be waterproof, but would not be brittle in cold weather. Also it would have to work in spite of the oil impregnated in the material itself.

Except to wash the feathers in a sack, disinfecting them with a solution of lysol, and beating them to make them fluffy as possible.

Perhaps you could suggest other material that would be more suitable.

Any criticism, comment, or suggestion that you see fit to make will be greatly appreciated.

—CHAS. C. MAYSE, Eugene, Oregon.

Reply by Mr. Paul M. Fink:—This thing of designing a sleeping bag for use in Alaska is something new to me, for I've had no experience with arctic work, and I'm going to sidestep as gracefully as possible by giving you what little I may happen to know concerning sleeping gear, and then let you work out the details for the particular climate you will encounter. You know, Alaska covers a great deal of territory, with a wide range of temperatures, and your letter did not state just where you would go or whether you would be there in summer or winter.

The warmth of any bedding material is dependent not on its weight, but on the insulating quality of the dead-air spaces in the fibres, this confined air preventing the escape of the body heat of the occupant. The softer and fluffier a material is the warmer it will prove. This is shown by the difference between an army blanket and the blankets ordinarily sold for home use, even though both be made 100% of wool. The army blanket is subject to hard wear, and consequently a portion of it is made of very hard twisted material. The other is woven of a much softer yarn, and pound for pound, is very much the warmer of the two.

Another very necessary thing to remember is that no sleeping bag should have a watertight cover. The human body gives off considerable moisture through the pores even during the hours of sleep, and if this is not permitted to escape, but is congealed on the inner surface of the waterproof cover of the bag it will tend to make the whole clammy and cold. If a cover is used that is water-repellent, as is a cloth which has undergone the cravenetting treatment, it will shed most of the outside moisture, while permitting that condensed from within to escape through the interstices of the fabric. It is this same principle of permitting the inner moisture to escape that accounts for the superiority of

the Fiala No-Hide-Fur bag over one made of real fur, attached to the skin.

There is no real eider down to be obtained on the market now, as the killing of these ducks is prohibited. What is used is the down from domestic geese, ducks, turkeys and chickens, with degree of excellence in the order named. Goose down and feathers is far the better, from the point of fluffiness, resilience and strength (freedom from breaking). Goose down can be obtained from the mail-order houses for something like \$2.00 per pound, with chicken feathers costing only about a sixth as much. One of the great objections to any type of feathers is their susceptibility to dampness, and their tendency to mat down and lose all insulating qualities when wet.

From your letter I believe you have discovered the very important fact that it is not hard to get enough cover to protect you from the air above, but that the cold that penetrates to your very bones comes from beneath, and that one should remember to have the insulation of this part of the bag considerably heavier than that above.

All winter I have been planning to make a bag for use in high altitudes this summer, but haven't yet gotten to it. This I plan to have somewhat body shaped, with an outside covering of balloon silk, waterproofed on the bottom, but unprocessed on top, an inner bag of some light-weight woolen material and between them quilted lambswool. Like yourself, I back-pack, and have figured that this combination, using about two and a half pounds of wool, will keep me warm in temperatures down to freezing. I wear wool clothing inside and out, and sleep in it, too. I cannot help but believe that an outer and two inner bags like this, weighing all told a little over ten pounds, would protect you in most any kind of weather? I'm sure they would if a down bag were used for the one closest the body.

As the bag is not wanted waterproof I can see no reason for cementing the seams. Balloon silk is really not silk, but a very closely woven, light-weight cotton material, and is itself not watertight, nor will cold weather affect it. For processing the lower part of the bag, and this is solely to protect against wet ground, I plan to use one of the commercial waterproofing compounds like "Preservo" and am of the opinion this will not stiffen up greatly in cold, as any of the paraffine preparations will do. Zippers or other of the patented slide fasteners can be gotten from the department stores or the big mail-order houses, a two-foot length costing about 50 cents.

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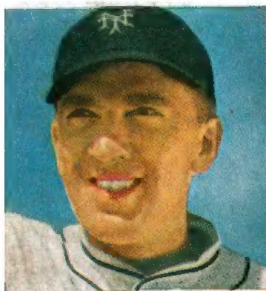
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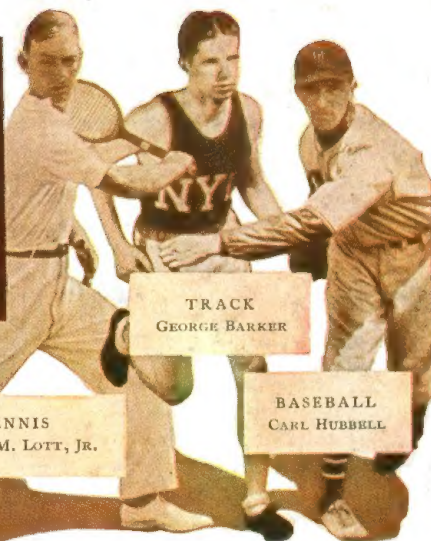
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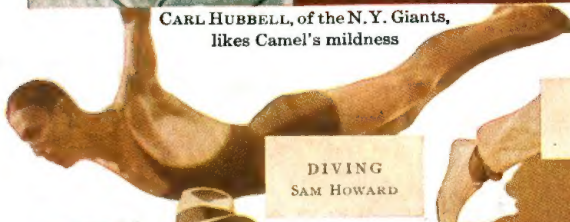
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